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The arrow whistled through the short space between narrow - eyed horseman and raving king of the wilderness.

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CHAPTER I
Rescue!

OLD Red Thunder's band of Mountain Crow Indians, from whose camp Joe Conway had ridden away at daybreak on the trail of runaway ponies, named it Winter Kill Canyon.

It was a grassy valley alongside a clear trout stream and under the shadow of a vast sheer wall of granite. Whitened bones and skulls of buffalo littered the base of the cliff.

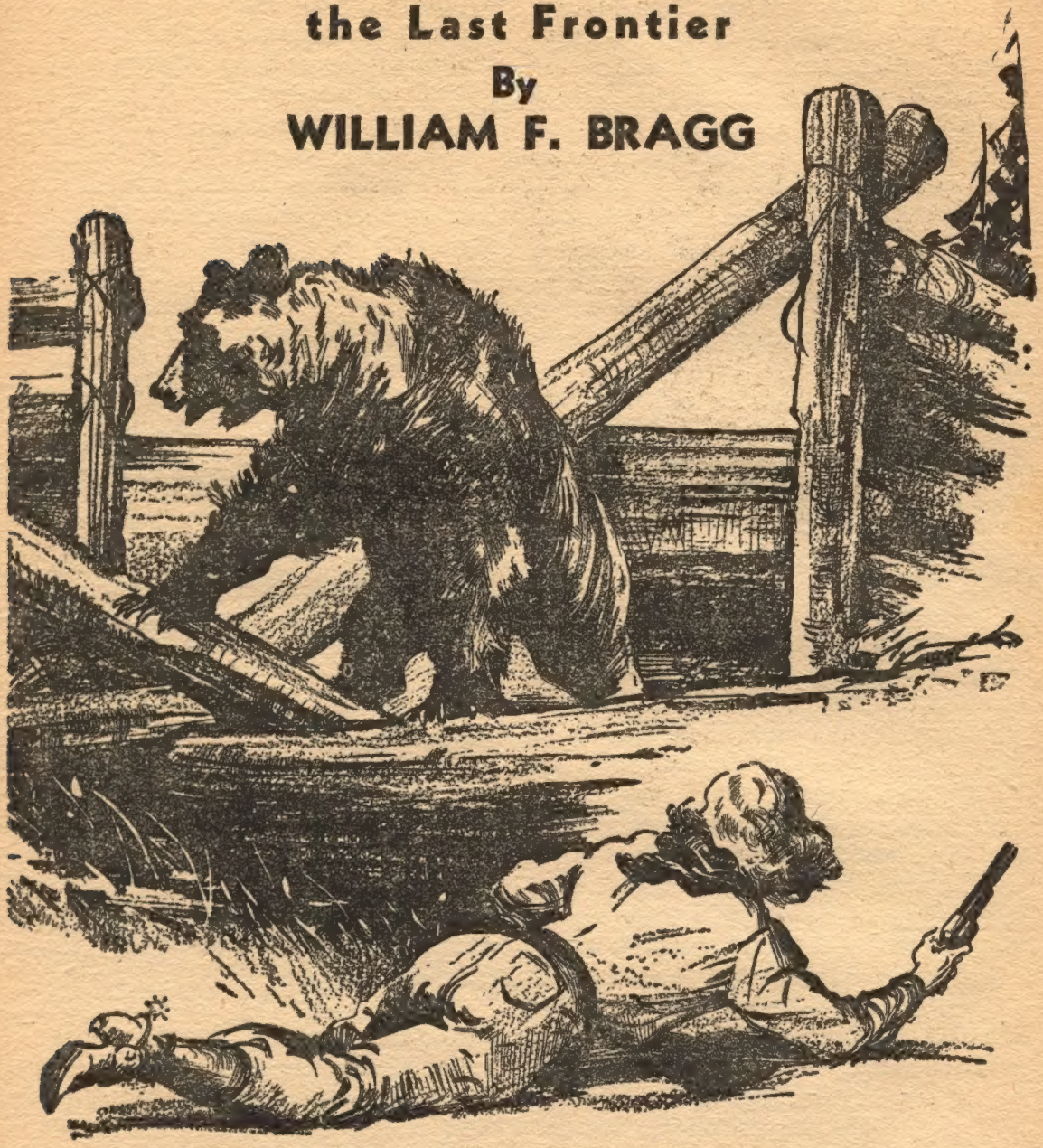
Formerly, Indians had rounded up

GRASS SCOUT

A Stirring Novel of the Last Frontier

By

WILLIAM F. BRAGG



the shaggy herds grazing on the mesa beyond the wall, stampeded the clumsy animals, sent them rushing to their death over the rim of the cliff. Thus a supply of winter meat was achieved without waste of high-priced ammunition or prized hunting arrows. Hence, the name of Winter Kill.

But now the buffalo were gone from the summer meadows on the east flank of the Bighorns, although a hunter might find a dozen old bulls between the mountains and the Bozeman Trail fifty miles east along Powder River. They were the live remnants of once vast herds. Therefore

nobody wanted them because their hides and meat were tough.

White men are very particular.

JOE CONWAY sighed as he leaned on the wooden arch of his Indian-style saddle, a seat built from cottonwood splints and lashed with deer sinew. It was covered with the untanned hide of a bull elk which had been stretched over the frame while wet and allowed to dry there, thus forming a covering strong as iron and smooth because the hair side had been turned in.

Every part of Joe Conway's attire, excepting his broad-brimmed hat and knife and fire-arms, bespoke the influence of the mountain red-men. He wore a buckskin hunting shirt with a deep fringe of leather strings fluttering from shoulder and sleeve seams. His breeches were of similar leather, bound below the knee with straps that supported the beaded tops of moccasins.

His black hair, coarse as that of a mountain pony, fell almost to his shoulders. His gray eyes looked startlingly white in his lantern-jawed face which was burned almost black by the high country sun.

A quiver of arrows and a short bow of tough wood hung from his saddle.

The sigh parted Joe's thin, sun-baked lips as he stared at the skeletons, because he had helped other white men cut down that mighty store of natural meat which for centuries had fed the Indians. He had sold his bales of shaggy buffalo hides to traders, taken his money, spent it carelessly with his fur trading friends.

Now the buffalo were gone, and even the beaver meadows far back in the wilderness of the Bighorns were becoming deserted as white men's traps caught and drowned the little animals.

Elk and deer still grazed at timberline in the summer. There were antelope herds on the buffalo grass plains. But they were not easily stampeded over cliffs, and poverty-stricken Indians now lacked money to buy ammunition unless they sold their best ponies at poor-house prices.

Joe, trained from boyhood by a veteran mountain man, had seen the last of the fierce Sioux-Cheyenne wars waged to protect their Bighorn game fields from the white men.

He had fought beside General Crook at Goose Creek in the Rosebud battle while the troopers of Custer lay dead on the red-hued battlefield above the Little Horn.

And loving his mountain country, observing the sad efforts of friendly Indians like Red Thunder's band to secure meat against the starvation of winter, Joe had vowed that he would try to make up for some of the sins he had helped to commit. Sins such as the reckless, greedy massacre of the buffalo, not for their meat but solely to strip off hides and sell them for the St. Louis market price which —in the heyday of the buffalo hunters—was not princely.

Joe nudged his saddle pony's ribs with soft leather-clad heels, jogged on down the narrow trail. His packhorse, carrying sacks of parfleche, followed.

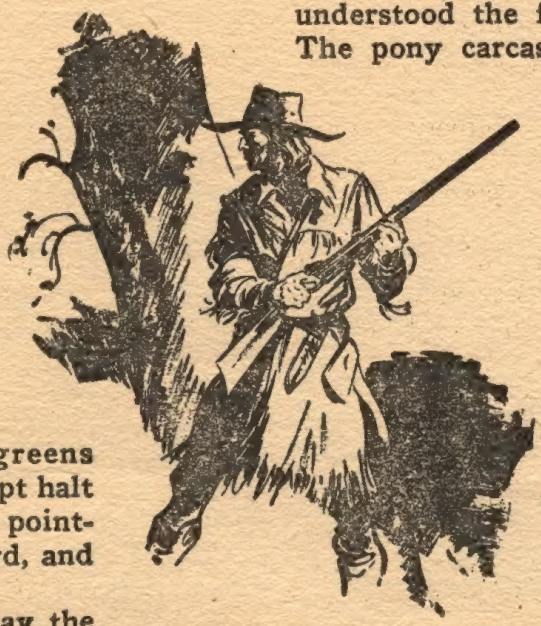
CONWAY'S outfit passed through the wilderness almost as silently as the furtive coyote slips along the hunting ridge.

Horses bred and raised by white men must wear iron shoes in the rough mountains or become sore-footed, but Conway's ponies trudged ahead with bare hoofs. They had been foaled in the badlands, and their hoofs made tough and rubbery by rough ground. They were as sure-footed as mountain sheep.

Horses were Joe Conway's business since he had quit trapping and hunting, and he rode Winter Kill Canyon because a dozen or more unbroken ponies had been stampeded that night

from Red Thunder's camp. Joe wasn't sure whether the fright had been caused by thieves or wild animals. Thus far he had found only a jumbled trail sign printed by galloping horses. A thief—red or white— could easily have ridden in that beaten trail and thus concealed tracks which, because of deeper print, might have informed the keen-eyed scout that the animal carried weight. But now as the meadow widened where the cliffs drew back, Joe rode slowly, seeking for that elusive clue in this softer ground.

He turned a corner of the trail obscured by a thin growth of lodge-pole pines and second-growth evergreens and came to an abrupt halt as his pony checked, pointed both ears forward, and whickered.



Joe Conway's attire, excepting his broad-brimmed hat and knife and firearms, bespoke the influence of the mountain redmen.

Beside the trail lay the carcass of a black pony which had pulled a tendon a week ago. He understood, when he rode up to the body, why the black lay dead below Winter Kill Canyon. It had stampeded with its mates, dropped back after several miles of galloping because of its lameness.

Its death revealed to Joe that thieves had caused the stampede, for he saw a bullet hole in the head of the black and knew it had been ruthlessly killed so it could not retard escape, or, limping along in the wake of the stolen herd, lead pursuers to the camp of the thieves.

But more than men armed with guns had been at work on this black pony. An animal had torn out the upper ribs, dragged the red meat across the grass and gorged itself. Joe guided his nervous mount in short circles, studying the ground sign, picked out the light tracks of coyote pads where the wild dogs had come for tidbits.

The old pack-horse, ordinarily a quiet, steady animal, now indicated fear of this place. It swerved away from the black and red carcass.

Joe nodded as he saw the huge tracks in a soft spot of ground. He understood the fright of his horses. The pony carcass had been torn to bits by a grizzly bear. No mountain beast left so huge a foot mark as that mighty, bald-faced hunter.

Grizzlies and gray wolves never ate meat they hadn't killed during the plentiful buffalo days. Now, to all hunters, meat was meat, because the wolves and the grizzlies often felt hunger the same as the Indians.

Knowing that the great bear, after gorging, would crawl into some nearby hiding place to sleep, Joe caught up his pack-horse, rode slowly ahead, not only wary of the animal but also anxious to gain information concerning the robbers who had stolen his horses.

IN a tiny clearing, ringed by chokecherry trees from which hung luscious bunches of the shining black fruit, he found the grizzly.

Fifty yards ahead, the huge animal was battering down the rotten logs of a small structure that resembled a roofless cabin. Joe recognized the shack as an old Indian bear trap. The

red hunters had hung meat from a post inside the shack which was in reality nothing but a corral with one opening. A bear, lured in by the scent, would rise and tug at the bait, release a trigger cord, and allow logs to fall across the entrance barring any escape.

But now the logs had rotted. The grizzly, seeking a shady spot for digestion, had unwittingly dislodged the logs balanced over the entrance. Enraged when they crashed down, the brute had whirled, started clawing its way out.

Joe's horses were nervous as they glimpsed the huge brown shoulders tufted with white that gleamed under the sun, the gray bald face of the king of the mountains, and heard the rasping, husky bellowing that resembled a buzz saw hitting a knot in a hardwood log.

Ten yards from the log trap lay a slim youth. Dappled shadows of a tall lone pine in the clearing at first hid the form from the mountain man's keen eyes until the youth attempted to struggle off the ground.

With a final roar and a smashing drive of front claws, the grizzly knocked out the last log that barred it from freedom. Yellow sawdust puffed up like powder. The brute came roaring from the trap. It lumbered ahead on all fours.

But as the slim youth sat up, the bear caught the scent of humans. It reared back on its haunches, blinked its short-sighted eyes, raised its muzzle like a dog, sniffed the wind again.

The youth screamed.

"A girl!" gasped Joe Conway. In this wilderness he had never seen a girl whose skin was white, and had yellow, curly hair.

The sight of the grizzly, the throaty growl, had driven her to the extremity of terror. She scrambled up, sought to run. A leg buckled under her. She went down, lay there quivering, hands covering her face.

As the girl screamed, Joe's packhorse forgot all its training. A bear was bad enough but coupled with a feminine scream in the Bighorn wilderness, well, no sedate old pony could be blamed for bolting.

Joe's mount, rearing, fighting the bit, almost wrenched rawhide reins from its master's hands.

Beneath the terror-stricken girl's fear ran a strong undercurrent of courage, for now she quit screaming, struggled to one knee, drew a pistol from the sheath slung from her slim waist.

Joe Conway, who didn't often abuse a horse, slashed his stubborn, fighting mount cross-handed with his braided Indian quirt which was tipped with a lash that cut like a razor.

His rifle was in its beaded buckskin sheath, his Remington cavalry pistol buttoned in its covered holster.

But he possessed a swifter weapon than gun or knife. As he whipped his pony straight toward the bear, he flipped an arrow from the quiver, ripped the bow from its strap.

"Stand quiet!" he shouted. "Don't fire that gun!"

He knew if she fired and failed to kill the grizzly instantly, the beast would reach her in one long lunge, savagely maul her with claws, tear her to red ribbons.

Conway counted on the poor eyesight of the grizzly. Deliberately he quirted his frightened pony into danger to attract the bear's hostile attention.

The girl was wavering, almost ready to collapse, as Joe thundered past. He shouted a second warning. She seemed past the point where his shout could save her. She triggered her weapon—a long-barrelled revolver—and reeled backwards from the shock of the recoil and fell again to the ground, lay there helpless, bright hair covering her face, a victim of sacrifice to the red gods of the Bighorns.

The grizzly, biting and scratching at the slight but stinging wound where the bullet had creased its side, caught sight now of the yelling horseman, the bucking horse.

It emitted a shattering roar, charged toward Conway.

The buffalo bow—the bow that was strong enough to drive its short shaft through the tough hide of a buffalo bull and pierce the animal's vitals—twanged.

The arrow whistled through the short space between narrow-eyed horseman and raving king of the wilderness, cutting the white tips on the brute's right shoulder, swung it around in a fighting rage as it tore at the feathered shaft.

Then, the bellowing grizzly lunged toward Joe. The girl was forgotten.

The mountain man's pony, given free rein now, turned and stampeded through choke-cherry brush. Tiny branches cut Joe's face like a thousand whips. He rode for his life, knowing that for a short distance, a fighting grizzly can cover ground almost as swiftly as a horse.

HE reined in sharply where the shrubbery thinned, leaned far out from his saddle, almost overbalanced the scrambling panting pony so abrupt was the turn. But thus, Joe came into the wind again. His scent no longer blew toward the bear. The brush hid him. He worked out of the grove, while below him the raging wounded bald face plowed and fought its way down the valley, smashing down good-sized saplings that barred its way, tumbling huge boulders aside, creating a path of terror from which all living things fled.

So Joe Conway, a little white around the lips, a trifle whiter of eye too, guided his sweating pony back to the glade where the girl lay. He halted and slid from his mount. He anchored the pony to a bunch of willows before he knelt to aid her, because he knew that horses never break away from a patch of yielding willows, and this horse certainly desired to follow its pack-horse mate down the valley since the smell of grizzly still hung heavily over the clearing.

The girl's eyes were closed when Joe gently but awkwardly raised the small head covered by bright curls as yellow as coins from the mint. Her skin was creamy from the touch of Wyoming's summer sun. There were a few freckles across the small straight nose, freckles that stood out plainly now because of the fear that had driven the red blood from the round smooth cheeks.

This lone girl of the wilderness wore men's garments but deftly cut to hint at alluring feminine curves. There were soft knee-high boots adorned with bright silver-mounted

spurs, a silken scarf of scarlet around the round white neck, dark blue breeches and shirt of kersey cloth, but contrasting with this male attire, a narrow golden bracelet on dimpled right wrist.

"How in tarnation," muttered the perplexed young mountaineer, "did I ever size you up as a boy? You—with yore pretty curls. And—" his eyes narrowed, his lips tightened into a line as thin and sharp as the edge of a bowie, "yore bracelet."

Her long, dark lashes raised, showing eyes as blue as mountain forget-me-nots. Straightway they closed tightly as she saw the brown sharp face of the mountaineer and his wild mop of black hair released when his hat had fallen off during the flight through the brush.

"An Indian!" she screamed.

CHAPTER II
The Golden Bracelet

JOE CONWAY frowned. His lip curled. He might dress in buckskin, wear a bowie in a beaded sheath, but he was white to the heart and he resented the girl's fear although he should have been more gentle. Seeing this youth in his leathern garb, she had been as startled as Joe when he saw dainty femininity where it had never been seen before.

"Listen, sister," growled Joe, and he shook her slightly. "Where did you get that bracelet?"

His harsh words, his fingers that dug painfully into tender flesh drove away her terror, put a flash of anger into her eyes. She sat up stiffly, freed herself from Joe's grasp, even reached with one small hand toward the empty holster that had held the big gun with which she had confronted and stung the grizzly.

"It's layin' over there," snapped Joe. "Whar' yuh flung it when yuh failed to down yore bear. Why didn't yuh stand still when I yelled? Godamighty, don't yuh know a bear's half blind and charges the nearest movin' object? It only sees bright color like yore fancy neck tie. And what yuh doin' up here whar' yuh certainly don't belong, yellin' an' squawkin', callin' me an Injun? He—" he cut short the swear word, changed it into a mild form of oath which would have drawn a roar of laughter from any bunch of mountain men.

"Heavens," he said, "I been white for thirty years."

"Well," she snapped tartly, "you certainly don't look white. Why don't you wear civilized clothes and get your hair cut? I suppose you are one of these bold bad men of the mountains, making a living selling bad whiskey to the Indians. Loafing your way through life."

She spoke with anger, but even so there was a throaty drawl to her voice, a husky musical drawl that did queer things to the tough heart of Joe Conway. But not for worlds would he show it. Not until she told him where she had found that thin gold necklace with its queer design of bunches of grapes.

"Listen, sister," he said carefully, sitting cross-legged with his brown work-calloused hands balanced on each buckskin knee, "I wear my hair long to keep the rain outa my face up in the peaks, and to keep mosquitters off the tip of my head when it peeks from my sooguns. I wear buckskin because the nearest white man's store is that crooked tradin' post run by Magpie Slemp down in the flats, and I won't pay double prices for trade goods of rotten flannel and boots made out of paper. I've lived in mountains most of my life. I know lots about Indians. In some ways I think more of them than I do of some palefaces I've seen. Like Magpie Slemp fer instance. But that ain't sayin' this buckaroo named Joe Conway is an Injun lover. Yuh can ask any of the boys

of the Fifth Cavalry that I scouted for durin' Crook's campaign, whether I had Cheyenne hair for bridle tassels. So if you and me are to get along, just quit yellin' yore head off an' callin' me an Injun."

SHE sat up too, one slim leg doubled under her lithe body. A smile came to her red lips. Gracefully she raised her arms, began to do things to those bright curls. She found a queer gadget of black wire, held it between white teeth while her fingers weaved in and out of blond ringlets. Later Joe discovered this was a hairpin. It was the first he had ever seen and absently he thought what a fine line of trade goods they would make for the Crow squaws of Red Thunder's band.

"Well," she whispered, eyes dancing, "after all that talk, Mister Joe Conway, I'll never again call you an Indian. I can see now that your eyes are gray. Blue-gray like those of my father. Now I'll give you a short history of my life since you were kind to me. In the first place, Mister Conway, I was born in Texas—" she hummed a little snatch of song, "in Texas, down on the Ryer Grandy!"

Then she gave a brief sketch of her life. Her father was Captain Bill Bonham. She was Gail Bonham. Her father had ranged longhorn cattle on the border, pushed north when the Chisholm Trail opened, wintered down south near Cheyenne after the Union Pacific was built, later formed a party of settlers and headed north toward Montana to secure buffalo grass range untouched by longhorns.

"We intended to summer down on Powder River," she concluded. "But there came an army of Mormon crickets. They ruined the grass. Then the water holes dried up. So we swung toward these mountains on the scout for buffalo grass. My father, as captain of the emigrant train, was blamed for all our troubles. We're camped down at Slemp's post now, still scouting for buffalo grass. I rode up here this morning with my father and a cowboy from the outfit. I got interested in trailing a bunch of elk and lost sight of Dad. I thought I might be lost. I saw what appeared to be a cabin. I went down to it. I was off my horse." She quit smiling, shuddered. "I yelled hello and—and that bear looked out at me. I turned to run, caught my spur in a sagebrush. I fell, hurt my ankle. My pony snorted and got away. And—and then you came riding."

"Your ankle still sore?" he asked.

She laughed, stood up, lowered her right boot to the ground. She almost crumpled as a shaft of pain shot through her. Joe, rising hastily, caught her in his arms.

"Bad hurt," he said. "You're in tough luck, Miss Gail. An ankle, mebbe busted. And yore pony gone. Well," he took out his knife, "we'll take a look at it."

She flushed. "What are you intending to do with that big knife?"

"Cut that boot off your leg. Patch up yore ankle."

"Can't you pull off the boot?"

Joe grinned dryly. "You try it."

The foot was swollen. She moaned and turned pale after a tug at heel and toe. She lay back on the grass, pale and spent.

"Cut it off," she whispered.

Gently he ripped away the leather, cut through kersey cloth and hand woven cotton stocking. He bared the rounded limb, laid blunt, tender fingers on the swollen bruised spot above the ankle.

"Now lay quiet, Miss Gail," he advised earnestly. "Rest while I get some Injun herb medicine outa my saddle pocket. Right good stuff for what ails you."

"You—you've tried it before," she faltered, wide-eyed, "on—on ankles?"

"Naw," he answered, striding toward his pony on his long saddle-

warped legs. "Used it on a black pony I owned. He pulled a tendon in his off hind laig. Shore brought him out of it—"

Gail Bonham sat up stiffly, eyes flashing, short nose tilted.

"Imagine," she scoffed, addressing his broad buckskin back. "Imagine comparing my ankle to a pony's leg. The—the very idea."

WHATEVER embarrassment she had felt at allowing a frontier stranger to administer first aid was lost now in her disdain of Joe Conway. For down in Texas, when she had worn billowing hoops and crinoline at cattleland balls, there had been bright-eyed young men to admire the flash of Gail Bonham's trim ankles so demurely displayed in the Virginia Reel and the Varsuviana.

"Joe not only looks like an Indian," Gail reflected. "He—he acts like one. Horse medicine! Pah."

She bounced her shoulders, jolted her leg, gasped with pain. She was glad indeed when Joe Conway strapped the ankle with wrappings of soft doeskin over the Indian herbs and then cooled the fever in her foot with cold water from his skin-covered canteen.

"And now," he said, "now that yo're feelin' better and the pink's back in yore cheeks—I crave to talk sign."

"Talk sign?"

"Read the blazes of yore trail."

"Please drop that mountain gibberish and talk plain United States, Mister Conway."

He flushed, frowned, finally pointed at the golden bangle around her wrist.

"What I mean," he drawled, "is whar' did you get that?"

She said haughtily. "You saved me from a bear with your little bow and arrow, Mister Conway, for which I truly thank you, but why you should wish to know all about my personal belongings is more than I can understand. Suppose," she went on maliciously, "I told you that a young man, a *very nice* young man in Texas, Mister Conway, locked that bracelet around my wrist." She gave him an arch glance and waited, since she was accustomed to eager young men who stuttered when they hurried to answer her.

Joe Conway didn't stutter. He leaned forward, seized her wrist, drew her toward him while his keen gray eyes glared down at the bracelet, saw only the gold not the dimples. Gail Bonham cried out angrily, tried to thrust away from him.

But he said sharply, coldly, "You never got that from no young man. Don't lie to me. Don't flash yore blue eyes. Tell me quick—where did you git that bracelet? Talk—talk, dang yuh—"

He layed his left hand on her slim shoulder, shook her so savagely that her hairpins came out and her bright curls fell down, framing her flushed and angry face.

She looked into Joe's cold eyes for a long moment, then anger gave way to fear. After all, she was alone in the wilderness, helpless, in the power of a relentless gray-eyed youth in buckskins who seemed to know nothing about girls and persisted in these questions about the bracelet which carried an underlying threat.

"Oh—oh, you—" she sobbed. "I—I won't tell—"

He took her in his arms, not lovingly, but to shake her and thus force an answer from her contrary lips.

"That bracelet," he whispered between tight lips, "belonged to my best friend. A man who was murdered not far from here. Killed, I tell you, for the furs in his pack. Shot down with an arrow. Scalped to boot. For years he wore such a bracelet, and it was locked on his wrist. But when they found him, the bracelet was gone. Today—I find you wearin' it. Gail Bonham—you'll answer me. Or I'll—"

A GUN cracked from the evergreen timber at the base of the Winter Kill cliff. A bullet whined past Joe's head. He flung the girl aside, rolled his lithe body between her and the hostile fire. He might be in deadly earnest about discovering why she wore a murdered man's prize bracelet, but true to his code, she would be defended from bullets while he sheltered her with his lean frame and he fought off the hidden foe.

His gun was in its buckskin sheath on his pony. The animal trailed off a few steps. But trained to stand under fire like any good buffalo horse, the cayuse stopped, swung around, pointed its ears toward the timber where smoke from burning powder coiled upward in the summer breeze.

Joe reached for the Remington he carried on his belt, although he seldom resorted to this weapon as it required fixed ammunition which was difficult to procure and very expensive.

He raised the Remington, an old Civil War cavalry hand gun of .44 caliber which carried six shells. A gun not fast in action but a killer up close.

Resting the long barrel on the palm of his left hand as though the Remington were a rifle, Joe unlatched two bullets. They dug up sod ten yards in front of the timber.

A heavy rifle roared an answer. A slug whizzed over Joe's head, slapped into the walls of the old bear trap.

Then something that resembled a small cannon for noise, a gun that deafened him since the booming barrel was alongside his right ear, smashed swift lead into the timber. He could see green leaves shoot into the air, white strips of bark fly from trees.

Joe rolled on his side, raised a yell as he saw that Gail Bonham had refused to accept protection. She lay there, not far behind him, tightly grasping the long old gun she had used on the grizzly. She was pulling the trigger with her right thumb.

"Godamighty!" gasped Joe, blinking his eyes against the choking powder smoke, "what's that gun yo're usin'?"

"This," snapped Gail, "is a single action, forty-five caliber Colt. Didn't you ever hear one before?"

"No," grunted Joe. "I've never heard 'em. But I heard *of 'em*. They're too expensive for tree-jumpers like me."

"Then listen," said Gail.

Wham! she snapped the last cap in the peace-maker.

Out of the brush rocketed a horseman whose white whiskers fluttered in the wind. He galloped straight toward the mountaineer and the Colt-wielding girl. He yelled in a high-

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pitched voice as he socked his spurs into the ribs of a panting, wall-eyed pinto pony.

"I never see him before," Joe rapped out grimly, "but he bit off more than he could chaw when he fired on me. Here's whar' I take me a white scalp."

He lined the sights of the Remington on the rider.

"Inside fifty hoss jumps," he muttered, "the ol' badger is Joe Conway's meat."

The hot barrel of Gail's Colt knocked down the Remington as Joe pulled the trigger. The big bullet drilled into the soft ground five feet toward his front. It threw dirt into his eyes, half blinded him.

"Dang yuh," he yelled, clawing to clear his eyes. "Now that locoed ol' billy goat will git us shore—"

"No!" screamed Gail. "He won't! That's my father—"

JOE CONWAY slumped weakly. The Remington dropped from his suddenly nerveless hand.

"I figured," he gasped, "that a grizzly b'ar was the most onsartain thing in these hills 'til jest now. But a girl beats a grizzly for plumb unexpectedness. Yuh cry over a busted ankle one minute and then yuh try to shoot yore own father."

"I didn't try to shoot him," she snapped.

"My Gosh! Yuh emptied a Colt that direction. The ol' coot shore come boilin' out like yuh mighta stung him."

"But I didn't know it was Father until he *did* come out."

"You wouldn't have cried any if you had beefed a strange hombre?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because," Gail Bonham whispered, "I was mad because they were shooting at you."

Joe gulped, blinked his bleary eyes still obscured with stray bits of buffalo grass and sod. So she had fired to save him, even after the way he had treated her about that bracelet. Nope, you couldn't tell anything about a girl.

Then Captain Bill Bonham reined down, let his frightened pony slide toward them with shod front feet cutting ditches in the soil. Every hair in Cap Bonham's gray mustache quivered. His cheeks were red as fire. He pointed, with a Colt gun similar to Gail's, to a fresh welt down the low swell of his apple-horned saddle where a bullet had struck. For some reason the captain could only sit there and pant. He seemed unable to talk.

Gail Bonham shook her head, snapped. "Tut tut, Father. Remember your bad heart—"

"You—you—" Cap Bonham found voice, threw down his gun on Joe. "Hittin' my saddle this way. Knockin' out my wind with the spent bullet. Dang yuh—yuh Injun—I'll drive a slug plumb through yore lights an' liver."

"Father," Gail said reprovingly as though she were scolding a child. "I shot you in the stomach and he isn't an Indian. His name is Joe Conway and he knows how to heal girls' broken ankles with Indian horse liniment. So—put down that gun before you do something foolish."

CHAPTER III
Captured!

CAPTAIN BILL sat his pinto gulping like a hooked fish. His blue-eyed daughter sat on the ground cramming live loads into the blackened cylinder of her Colt peacemaker.

Joe scrowled, holding his Remington ready for a quick throwdown if the locoed old Texas cattleman stirred up another fuss. Joe couldn't understand why the father had hidden in the timber, fired on him without warning. And being direct in words as in action, Joe asked the old

gentleman why he had done it, and why he was so mad now.

Captain Bill puffed out his chest.

"Stranger," he barked, fixing a pair of gray-blue eyes as cold as winter ice on the young mountaineer, "I lost sight of that pesky darter of mine. She's always runnin' off. It was strange country, so I left Pecos Jones who'd just rounded up the hosses—"

"Hosses?"

"Yeah. We run into a rock corral built in a bunch of brush. Here's this bunch of hosses. Sweated up too like they'd been run hard. Eleven head. Injun brands. So Pecos figured we'd made a haul. We could break these hosses for our cow outfit or sell 'em over in the Black Hills to the minin' camps."

"But you just said," Joe pointed out, deadly quiet, "that these ponies carried Injun brands. So they belong to Injuns. If you or yore man, Pecos Jones, took them, you'd be rustlers."

Bill Bonham sniffed, laughed. "Hell," he drawled, "who cares what happens to a damned Injun?"

Joe Conway's gray eyes blazed. He flung up his pistol. Captain Bill, small in size but a Texas game-cock for courage, tilted his Colt. They were not six feet apart. They would have died then and there in the flaring smoke and flash of thundering guns if Gail Bonham had not leaped up, set her teeth against the sharp pain from her bandaged ankle, flung her slim body between the two.

"Hold your fire!" she cried. "Aren't you civilized men? Trying to kill each other on sight over a question of Indian ponies." She turned stormily on her father. "This man," she flamed, pointing to Joe, "just saved me from a grizzly bear after I had fallen and was helpless on the ground. He risked his life to do it. And now," she began to sob, "first you try an ambush, and then you go for a gun to kill him."

Old Bill looked sheepish, blinked his eyes. He stuck his gun in leather, leaned from his saddle, extended a claw-like right hand.

"Stranger," he apologized, "I jumped my rope some. I want to thank yuh for savin' Gail from a bear. Mebbe it'll teach her a lesson, to mind her daddy and stay with him when he comes on a buffalo grass scout into hostile Injun country."

Joe Conway, disdained the outstretched hand, said grimly. "There hasn't been a hostile Injun for five years in this country. Just Crows. They're all friendly. I've hunted and trapped with 'em for years. Was with a bunch of their scouts when Crook hit the Sioux in the Rosebud. They can die just as brave and hard as white men, and I won't shake hands with any man who will try to steal their hosses."

Old Bill jerked back his hand, flushed with rage.

"The reason I hid out," he said, "an' fired on you was because from yore riggin' I took yuh as an Injun. I saw Gail fightin' in yore arms. I was tryin' to save my daughter." He narrowed his eyes, bent from his saddle, peered into the brown face of Joe. "The reason I got no use for Injuns," he went on, "is that I was a captain of the early rangers organized on the border to fight off the Comanches. It may interest you to know, my young Injun-lovin' friend, that I have looked on the faces of my own people who had been scalped and tortured by those hellish renegades."

Joe snapped. "I've also seen white men with their hair missin', but I still don't believe the only good Injun is a dead Injun. I've also seen white men as vicious as the worst renegade that ever jumped the reservation and I'm here to say that Red Thunder's band of Crows are friends of mine. Once they saved me an' my partner, ol' Jabe Flint, from death in a blizzard. We had lost our hosses, run out of grub. Jabe busted his leg, and until these Crows come along Jabe was like

you. He hated Injuns—any Injuns. They took him in and saved him, in spite of the fact that he was trespassin' on trapper country they claimed. Jabe changed his mind about Injuns. He sorted 'em out from then on—good, bad, and indifferent—just like white men."

A strange look came over Bill Bonham's leathery face when Joe mentioned the name of his partner, Jabe Flint, the veteran mountaineer who had adopted the homeless waif wandering the streets of St. Louis, had shined boots and sold papers for a living.

"Jabe Flint," he whispered. "You knew Jabe Flint?"

Joe's head drooped. He brushed a hand across his eyes.

"He was like a father to me," he muttered. "He raised me from a no-good pup. Anything I amount too come from ol' Jabe. And now—"

"Where is Jabe Flint?"

Bill's voice, so weighted with strange fear, chilled the heart of Joe. He turned and saw that Gail Bonham, white as death, was gripping the lone pine, swaying as she stood there, about to fall. Joe sprang forward, seized her. But the menacing words of the cattleman checked him.

"Where is Jabe Flint?" Bill rasped. "Answer quick—for yuh seem to know more about Jabe than any man I've met in the west."

Joe said quietly. "Put up yore gun, Bonham. I'll show you the grave of Jabe Flint."

Captain Bill's hostility faded. He slumped over his saddle horn, with gun arm trailing listlessly. Gail staggered to his horse, reached up and put her arms around her father's sagging waist.

"Dead," Bill choked out. "Jabe—dead."

THEY trailed slowly down the canyon. Gail rode Joe's pony. He walked, striding easily over the rough ground, silent as any brave of Red Thunder's band.

Finally, they came to a green and peaceful meadow near the canyon outlet. Far down on the hazy flats could be seen the outlines of adobe buildings of Magpie Slemp's trading post, the clustered canvas-topped wagons of the Texas train, and a darker moving blotch toward the river that indicated a grazing herd of cattle.

Joe halted under a shady tree. He pointed to a mound of earth, covered with new grass. The Bonhams stood over the grave. Tears were streaming from Gail's eyes. Her father's grim jaw was tightly set. He read the inscription which had been burned into a board.

Joe Conway had never seen that headboard before. He jerked up his head when he heard the old cattleman mutter "Jabe Flint, killed by an Injun—scalped—"

Joe leaped forward, laid his hands on the board, uprooted it, flung it to the ground, stamped on it.

"A lie," he raged. "No Injun killed old Jabe—"

"The board says that," Bonham flared. "Killed and scalped."

"This is the territory of the Crows. Red Thunder's band. Jabe was their best friend, I tell you. He traded with 'em, gave 'em fair value for their furs. He was ambushed six months ago as he rode down toward Slemp's with a winter's haul. Killed with an arrow. Scalped."

"Well," roared Bonham, "what more evidence do you want that an Injun killed him? And from here on," Bonham shook his fist in Joe's face. "Any Crow I think helped to kill my brother—I'll kill him on sight."

"Yore brother?" Joe gasped.

"My brother. He went to the dogs after the Comanches burnt his home and killed his people. He quit Texas, took the name of Flint. Once or twice he come back but he couldn't stand bein' around where his loved ones had

lived. On one trip he gave a golden bangle to little Gail. She was his pet. He said it was a good luck bracelet made from gold found near the little minin' camp of Denver on Cherry Crick in Colorado Territory. He locked it on her wrist, and locked a mate on his'n. He said Gail would always know him hereafter an' she'd know him." Old Bonham looked down at the grave. "I got letters now an' then from Jabe. I never knew where to write back, but once he told me about this fine buffalo grass country. Sent me a map of what he called Winter Kill Canyon. Swore it would make a fine cow ranch when the Injun trouble cooled off. So when the crickets run us off the flats, I thought of the map. I hoped mebbe I'd run across Jabe up here, so I advised these folks to follow my lead. We got up here but Slemp told us the Injuns was barrin' whites from the canyon, and he said Jabe Flint hadn't been seen for months."

"Slemp lied then. He's lied all his life. He talks a blue streak an' yuh can't believe a word he says. That's why they call him Magpie. Jabe got old an' couldn't foller the fur trail. I moved out a year back an' saw northern Montana and parts of Canada. When I left, Jabe said he had saved some money an' figured to buy out Magpie Slemp an' run this tradin' post. He didn't like the way Slemp sold bad whiskey to the Injuns. Slemp had corrupted some of the best warriors thataway. Like Red Thunder's brother, Black Eagle. I got back a week ago. The Crows showed me Jabe's grave, told me how he had been killed and that they was blamed by Slemp."

"Shot with an arrow and scalped," Bonham insisted.

Joe rapped out. "Couldn't a treacherous white man commit a murder like that? Blame the reds?"

"You got anybody in mind?"

"How about Magpie Slemp? Supposin' Jabe did buy that post. Then after Slemp got the money, he killed the old man and had both the post and the purchase price. Also the load of furs Jabe was said to be bringin' in. Also—"he pointed to Gail's golden bracelet, "the good luck charm."

Then Joe touched his bow and arrows. He pulled a feathered shaft from the quiver, showed the flint head with deerskin wrappings to Bonham.

"That's a hunting arrow," he explained. "The secret of makin' flint heads is lost. The Injuns don't know how. So they prize these heads. They use those without barbs for huntin' so they can pull out the arrow after they down their meat. But when they go on the war path, they shoot a war arrow, one with barbs like razors. When it goes into a man, it generally stays there. If it don't kill him instantly, it gets in its work sooner or later. Ol' Jim Bridger, fer instance, is carryin' a Blackfoot arrow point in his back this minute. Bonham—" he replaced the arrows, "I'd like to see the flint head that killed my partner and yore brother."

FROM a narrow gulch that cut down from the canyon slopes, a party of riders approached. They checked their horses within ten yards of the grave. Two of the men, hawk-faced mountaineers in buckskin and moccasins, held the lead rein on a nervous pack-horse. A third rode herd on eleven loose ponies. A fourth cantered up to the group around the grave. He was a dark-faced man, with long sharp nose, a pair of bright bird-like eyes, a thick slanting mustache and long black beard that hid his lean jaws and pointed chin.

Bonham heard the horse, whirled around. "Slemp!" he roared. "Why didn't you tell me Jabe was dead and buried? I informed yuh he was my brother an' I wanted to see him, and let him git acquainted with his growed-up niece."

Magpie Slemp chattered with a flash of white teeth, a hint of mock sorrow in his smooth voice, a side glance of leering admiration directed toward Gail Bonham.

"I didn't want to see tears come into the little gal's blue eyes," he explained. "I'm a softhearted man, Cap'en Bonham. That's why I advised yuh not to settle yore emigrants in Winter Kill Basin whar' these murderin' Crows are likely to scalp yuh as you sleep. I aimed to bust it to you gradual that Jabe was dead. I did business with him an' thought lots of the ol' feller. I put that headboard up to show my respect. Even though he had sorta disappointed me in business. Made a deal to buy out my post then backed down. But I excused that. I took care of him last winter when he was old an' sick an' his pardner deserted him an' went to Montana—that Injun lovin' pardner of his—Buckskin Joe—"

Joe Conway whirled, reached toward his belt, but Magpie Slemp sat laughing on his roan horse, broad hat patched with rabbit fur pulled down over his sharp features, black beard glinting like coal in the sun. He had trained a cavalry pistol on Joe's heart.

And the men with the pack-horse—Joe's old pet—they too sat with grins on their hairy faces. Their long rifles were held carelessly, but in such position they could be turned instantly on Joe.

The herder of the eleven ponies—Joe's stock—sat loosely on a gaunt old horse. He wasn't white. He was an Indian. He wore tattered blue garments that had come from some sale of condemned army goods. His long black hair was streaked with gray. A limp hawk's feather trailed from the greasy frowsy mat. Loose-faced, blank-eyed, the Indian sat there guarding Joe's stolen horses.

"Injun lover," Magpie Slemp drawled softly. "If it hadn't been for you eggin' on these reds, old Jabe wouldn't be buried there today with his money gone, his fur stole, and his hair lifted. Injun lover—"

JOE wasn't expert with a pistol, but on his left flank in a swinging beaded sheath, he carried a bowie with lead in the haft to balance the weight of the razor-sharp blade. He had taught himself to hit a mark on a tree at thirty paces three times out of four.

Slemp's hand, gripping the pistol, rested on the broad top of his saddle horn. His two followers, believing their chief held Joe under the cold drop, relaxed, lounged in their saddles, enjoying this baiting of the youth.

Magpie Slemp, like many of his kind, believing braggart words and actions would bring admiration to a girl's blue eyes, taunted Joe for the benefit of Gail Bonham. She stood white as death, watching, believing that if the mountaineer so much as reached for his gun, bullets would cut him down.

Captain Bill, bewildered, stricken with grief at the disclosure of his brother's fate, stood over the headboard which Joe had ground into the buffalo grass.

"Slemp," Joe stated coldly, "you killed Jabe Flint to get his furs, his money, and still keep that tradin' post full of rotten whiskey. The red-eye you used to break the will and good heart of Black Eagle over there. Black Eagle who once was a top scout for the white soldiers. Black Eagle who took many Sioux and Cheyenne scalps in his young days when hostile warriors raided the land of the Crows. Black Eagle, son of a chief, brother of a chief. A war chief himself before he threw away all he owned in hosses to drink the bad fire-water of the whites. Black Eagle—who was once a *man,* but who is now worse than a dog—a yellow dog. And you—" Joe's

voice rang out and the Indian stirred, turned his dull eyes toward the tall youth in buckskin, "and you, Slemp, *you* did that to a good man. You did it not only to git his hosses but to git his oldest daughter—"

Slemp howled. *"You lie!"*

His gun hand flashed upward but not as swiftly as Joe's, whose bowie flashed across the short space separating the men.

The eight inch blade pinned Slemp's hand to the saddle horn. He dropped his gun, reeled in his saddle, shrieking from the agony of razor sharp steel driven through the palm of his hand . . .

Joe Conway, fast on his feet, moving like a brown streak, followed the drive of the knife.

The men with the pack-horse came to life. They whirled their rifles as Joe sprang up behind Magpie Slemp, crooked his right arm under the trader's chin, jerked back Slemp's head, said between his teeth:

"You damned black murderer! I'll break your neck with my bare hands!"

So filled with rage was Joe that he failed to note the rush of the two horsemen. Gail Bonham, unable to move swiftly, screamed to her father:

"Don't let them kill him, Dad! Remember—he saved me—"

Bonham rushed in but a horse knocked him into the sagebrush.

Joe Conway, right arm strangling Magpie Slemp, was struck over the head with the heavy butt of a rifle, knocked senseless. As he rolled off the horse, he dragged the screaming trader with him.

"Grab the gal!" shouted the man who had attempted to brain Conway. "Grab her!"

Gail attempted to flee, crumpled, was captured.

Magpie Slemp, half-dazed, wracked with pain, wringing his bloody wreck of a right hand, ground his teeth as he looked at the senseless form of Joe Conway.

"Save yore bullets," he said. "I aim to kill him slow. Round up that old man. Tell Black Eagle to rope out a couple horses. We'll tie 'em down for trailin'."

But Black Eagle wasn't there and the loose ponies quietly grazed on the buffalo grass. The former war chief, the brave scout whose life had been broken by Slemp's poison, had fled into Winter Kill Canyon.

"Afraid," sneered one of the captors. "Jest like a drunk Injun. He quit his best friend like a scairt coyote."

CHAPTER IV
Torture!

SLEMP'S trading post was housed in the weathered adobe remains of an old army post. A stockade, ten feet high, surrounded the buildings. Originally, it had been built from slabs of sappy pine. Soldiers preferred green wood because raiding Indians could not set the barricade aflame with fire arrows. But these split logs had been here for twenty years, and the western sun had dried them out until they were like tinder.

When Joe Conway opened his bleary eyes, he saw that he was in the main room of the post, a section piled high with trade goods mostly picked up at army sales, and that Gail Bonham and her father were tied to rough chairs covered with elkskin. They sat near Joe who had been stretched out on the rear counter on a pile of wolfskins with his wrists and ankles bound.

The room was filled with rows of brass-bound smoothbore muskets which stood in racks. There were bars of lead for making bullets, kegs of powder. Behind the counter were piles of red blankets, bolts of calico, boxes of beads, small mirrors which the Crow squaws prized highly. But Slemp's greatest treasure were the two big hogsheads labelled "New

Orleans Molasses", which stood behind the counter near Slemp's desk.

Those barrels were full of red-eye whiskey which wise men declared Slemp distilled down in a cave by the river. It was concocted from potatoes, red pepper, dried fruit, and rattlesnake poison.

It had been a fine day in the Indian trade when Slemp sold a tin cup full of this poison to Indian hunters for one beaver skin per cup. Now the government forbade the sale of whiskey to the Indians and when Slemp rode abroad, he often wore high boots and carried flat bottles tucked below his knee. There were no laws against the liquor sale to white men and Slemp could thus play safe unless a government agent secured evidence of a direct sale to some Indian.

The black bottle had been Black Eagle's undoing. Like a child, the proud warrior had succumbed to the fiery poison. He even allowed his soft-eyed daughter to become a slave around the post, a cook, a dishwasher, kicked and beaten by Slemp's henchmen when she did not obey swiftly.

Old Bonham growled to Joe that Slemp had entered the post through a tunnel that led up from the river brush, a hidden exit built by troopers in the war days so that they might escape if attackers fired the fort or climbed over the stockade. Thus Slemp had avoided bringing his prisoners past the Texas camp where a dozen gaunt cowpunchers of the Bonham outfit would soon enough have freed their chief and his daughter.

IN THE rear of the room, not far from Joe, a fire had been built in a rock fire-place. Now an Indian woman entered silently on her moccasin-clad feet. She stirred up the fire, thrust the long barrels of two smooth-bore muskets into it.

"Dark Fawn," Joe said softly, "where is your father?"

She turned on him, black eyes flashing, spat like a snake.

"The man who talks like the bird," she said, "has told me you cursed my father. That he ran away ashamed. That I will never see him again."

Gail cut in. "Who is she? What's she saying?"

Joe had talked Crow dialect, so he explained this was Dark Fawn, enslaved by Slemp because of her father's love for the white man's whiskey, angry now because she loved her father and Slemp had deluded her into believing Joe had shamed the old man.

"What are the guns for?" Gail asked, eyeing the muskets. "The barrels are getting red-hot."

Joe wouldn't answer that but he knew. Torture rites were practiced by the squaws. Slemp would sit and laugh while Dark Fawn bared the body of Joe Conway and pressed red-hot iron down on cringing flesh. Slemp would sit and laugh while Joe Conway died slowly.

Slemp entered by a small rear door. Behind him trudged the two men who had been with him at the grave. They bore a limp burden covered with brown army canvas. They laid their bundle on the beaten dirt floor at the feet of old Bill Bonham, then stepped back.

Slemp ripped away the covering, while over by the fire-place, the crouching squaw rattled the guns in the red coals.

Bill Bonham strained forward against his buckskin lariat lashings until the knots almost burst. His eyes bulged. The cold sweat stood out suddenly on his range-tanned forehead. Gail Bonham turned white, choked, unable to scream.

There lay the body of a dead man, a tall fellow with sunbleached straw-colored hair and mustache, dressed in the horse-hide chaps, the high-heeled boots, the flannel shirt of the Texas cowboy. From his breast there pro-

truded the feathered shaft of an Indian arrow.

"Pecos," Bill groaned. "Pecos Jones —my friend."

Here lay the man who had accompanied the captain on the buffalo grass scout, located the ponies in the rock corral, the stock carrying Indian brands.

Magpie Slemp grinned slyly under his black beard, bent, grasped the arrow, pulled it from the body. He held up the red flint head. Gail hid her eyes. But Joe Conway rolled over, looked sharply at the point.

Slemp drawled to Bonham. "Too bad. We found him up there with those Injun hosses. He was tryin' to run 'em off. Some Crow hunter spotted him mebbe. Put an arrow through him. Too bad, Bonham." He balanced the arrow like a wand.

"Same kind of an arrow that killed Jabe Flint. Jest like that middle one on the shield. I put that up there after we took it outa Jabe's back. Jest before we buried him."

Joe Conway's sharp eyes ranged from the arrow Slemp held to the shaft on the shield. Neither flint head carried barbs. Conway, always direct, never one to scheme and beat around the bush, cried:

"Slemp—you lie! Neither man was killed by an Injun."

"How do you know?"

"Both those arrows are the huntin' type. An Injun only uses 'em for game. But when an Injun decides to kill a man, he always fires a war arrow. One with barbs so it'll stick closer than death. Slemp—"

Slemp strolled over, knocked down Joe, bent over him, black eyes glittering.

"When we take Pecos Jones out to the cow camp," he drawled, "and show those Texans the way he was killed, what will *they* think? They don't know as much about Injuns as you claim. They'll start to clean out Red Thunder's band and—"

JOE groaned. Texans, accustomed to flat country, would be ambushed and killed easily in the black canyons of the Bighorns.

Slemp sauntered over, answering Joe's unspoken question with action. He bent and kissed the white-faced girl, ran his hands through her mop of bright curls.

Something stirred by the fire-place. Dark Fawn was watching. Slemp swung around, seized a stick of firewood from the box near Gail's chair, hurled it. The Indian girl, struck on the head, fell without a sound, lay unmoving while the gun barrels turned red in the fire. Slemp walked over, nudged her limp body with his toe, said to his grinning men:

"We'll run our sandy on the Texas camp with that puncher's carcass. Then we'll take care of the ol' billy goat and this Injun lover."

"What about the gal?" croaked one of the henchmen.

"We need a new squaw," Slemp said coarsely. "I'm gittin' tired of hair black as hoss-hide. I like curls yaller as new gold."

Slemp's men picked up the body of Pecos Jones.

"Load it on a pack-hoss," he commanded. "And look sorrowful in that camp when I begin tellin' 'em what happened."

They trudged from the room. Slemp picked up the hunting arrow, turned to follow. Like a flash, Dark Fawn came up from the floor. Conway glimpsed the flutter of swirling red skirts of calico, the thud of moccasins as she leaped toward Slemp.

The red-hot barrel of the musket she carried, flashed. On a slim wrist, bared by falling sleeve, a golden bangle glittered.

Slemp turned with a yell. The hot gun barrel fell, knocked him flat. But as he went down, he ripped a pistol from his belt, fired upward. Dark Fawn broke at the knees, went down. The two lay there. Then the Indian

girl stirred, crawled slowly across that room which now was still as death.

From the top of a knee-high moccasin, she drew a slim knife. She reached up to the counter on which Joe lay. With a feverish light in her eyes, with a last vestige of strength, she passed the keen blade across the ropes that bound Joe's wrists. One by one they fell away.

One strand remained when Dark Fawn collapsed into a huddled heap on the floor. Joe Conway broke that final strand. As he bent to free his ankles, he saw Slemp stirring.

He leaped down from the counter, stumbled because his feet had gone numb from the tight lashings, saw Slemp jump up, poise his pistol, let the hammer fall.

The heavy slug creased Joe Conway's side, whirled him around. As he fell, he reached for the slim knife Dark Fawn had carried. Then he was up, forcing his way through the choking black powder smoke, racing to capture Slemp.

He saw the trader fleeing toward the open gate of the stockade, but suddenly that opening was barred. Fire sprang up the dried posts lashed with buffalo hide.

BLACK EAGLE had returned to his people, led them to rescue Joe Conway, burn out the post. Perhaps he believed the fire would dislodge Slemp's band from sheltering walls, make them easier to capture or kill on the broad plain.

Slemp swung around, fled back to the store-room to escape that yelling painted warrior who a few hours before had been a blank-eyed drunkard.

Joe dodged back into the store-room. An excited Indian might not stop with the taking of Slemp's scalp. He might wreak revenge on the two strange whites—Gail and her father—helpless in their ropes.

Slemp rushed through the doorway where his men had carried the body of Pecos Jones. Joe flung himself in front of Gail Bonham since Slemp carried a heavy pistol and there wasn't a similar weapon in sight. It would take precious time to load one of the old muskets in the rack.

Conway's sole weapon was the slim knife he carried, the implement with haft worn smooth by the hand of the Indian girl, and it wasn't balanced for throwing.

Slemp's gun hand was bandaged but he carried the pistol in his left. He paused a dozen feet from Conway, breathed hoarsely. "Five live loads. I'll do for you three. Save two for that damn Black Eagle."

Joe Conway said between his teeth: "You skunk! This girl's tied-up and helpless! And her dad too!"

"They never belonged around here. If they hadn't come enquirin' about Jabe Flint, everything would have worked out fine. But now—they know too much."

That was Magpie's failing. He talked too much—too long. Conway, lithe as a mountain cougar, dropped to his haunches, lunged straight toward the man's pistol.

His bullet hurried, his aim not sure because he fired with his left hand, Slemp put a bullet through Joe's left shoulder rather than between the youth's blazing gray eyes. Joe dropped from the shock. But that tough strength built up by years in the hills, the sturdy whipcord strength, the courage too, bred and schooled by a man like old Jabe Flint, brought Joe again to his feet.

"Damn you!" Slemp chattered. "Won't you *stay dead?*"

He slanted the pistol to put a slug through Joe's head.

Black Eagle stepped through the door in his paint and feathers, naked except for breech cloth and leggins. He carried a short bow. He had notched an arrow and he drew the feathers to his ear.

"Bird Man," he thundered. "Now your time has come to sing."

It meant that Slemp should sing his death song because this was the end. Slemp whirled to fire. The bow twanged as the pistol exploded. Slemp pitched over on his back, the arrow piercing his throat. He grasped the shaft with his right hand, choked as he sought to draw it out, then he gasped, his arm dropped limply across his chest. He lay there, with his glazed eyes looking up at the ceiling.

Black Eagle gathered his daughter's limp form in his arms, trudged with bowed head from the blazing post to where his people—Red Thunder's band—circled the Texas camp on their galloping war ponies.

THEY had come swiftly at word from Black Eagle to rescue their friend, Joe Conway. They assumed the Texans were his foes.

Slemp's henchmen had not had time to arouse the cowpunchers with a false tale of Pecos Jones' murder. Caught by surprise, the emigrant party would have been slaughtered but for the coming of Joe.

He staggered from the post. Old Bill Bonham guided his crippled daughter. Joe stepped between the camp and the whooping crowd of painted warriors, held up his right hand in the peace sign.

"They are all my friends," he told Red Thunder. "They will put back the meat where it ran before. These are a new kind of buffalo, slow elk. They will fatten quickly on the buffalo grass and Red Thunder's band will no longer starve in the winter."

"It is good," grunted the aged chief.

Then Joe lurched into the cook tent where he discovered Gail Bonham bending over the form of Dark Fawn. The golden bracelet gleamed in the failing light.

Old Black Eagle stood in the doorway, head turned sorrowfully away from the daughter he thought was dying, gloomy eyes on the blazing post where blue-white flames denoted the end of Slemp's red-eye whiskey.

"She'll live," Gail whispered to Joe. "Bullet hole is above the heart and lungs. And I'm letting her keep the bracelet. After all—she may have loved Slemp. When he kissed me, and scorned her, that was when she went for him. I suppose he gave her this bracelet as a present after he helped to kill Uncle Jabe. I—I don't wish to wear it—" she shivered. "Oh, Joe—"

"I wish," Joe said grimly, "I could use both my arms."

Gail said softly: "My ankle's sore but my arms are strong, Joe."

THE END

THE STRANGER

The Bishop's pulpit was a poker table, and his sermon was written with six-gun slugs.

By HAPSBURG LIEBE

His hawkbill flamed and roared, and Culp wilted earthward.

ALTHOUGH the night was scarcely an hour old, there was a sizeable crowd in Hondo City's premier saloon, the Spade Flush. But it was as yet an orderly crowd.

Back of his chips-laden table in the rear, George Farnley, the gambler, sat idle. That is, he called himself George Farnley. Because of his quiet, almost pious manner, his smooth talk and his always neat black clothing, Hondo City has nicknamed him "the Bishop." A big man, he was, in his middle forties, with oddly piercing gray eyes, and hair and beard and mustaches of the hue of old bronze.

Charley Linster, Rocking K cowboy, was gunning for Dansby Culp, range hog. Young and slim, usually smiling, Linster tonight was all fire-and-tow. He walked into the Spade

Flush with his old Colt six-gun loose in its holster, ran his narrowed blue eyes over the orderly crowd, and saw nothing of his man.

Then he ambled back to the Bishop's table. The Bishop had been in town but a week, and until this moment Charley had not seen him. But he had heard a great deal about him.

"Howdy, big hombre," Linster said. "They tell me you're a whiz with cards, can you make 'em do anything you want 'em to do, and can even tell fortunes with 'em. Well, I'm curious to know what mine is. How much?"

For the first time since he had been in Hondo City, George Farnley smiled. It was a friendly smile. He said, his voice so low that it did not carry beyond the cowboy: "I don't need cards for this, and there's no charge. Let's see—You're the one son of Bob and Sarah Linster, both dead, and your first name is Charley. You're on a dangerous road, *amigo*. It's all right to have nerve, as long as it's spiked with horse sense. If you got killed, a certain young lady would sort of regret it, wouldn't she? I mean Mabel Kernan, your boss, owner of the old Rocking K."

"Say—" gasped Linster—"you never even saw me before! How'd you know all that?"

George Farnley bent across his little table. He not only seemed, but was, very much in earnest.

"Nothing mysterious about it, *amigo*. I was brought up in this country. You're a dead ringer for your daddy when he was your age. That's how I knew you. The other, it's common talk. How you were a wild, young hombre up until some months ago, with only Mabel Kernan believing in you—you two have been friends since you were little shavers. How she persuaded you to take a range job with her and settle down. How Dansby Culp stole your dad's old ranch from you by hook *and* crook, and how he's now doing his damnedest to get possession of the Kernan Rocking K. You're up against something there, Charley. Culp is a big hombre. He owns the law here, I find, or what law there is here."

"Yeah," Linster heard himself blurting to this strange friend—"you're sure right. Dans Culp has had Mabel's cows rustled, stole her range creeks, bought up her notes and forced payment, and has gone so far as to have some o' her cowboys dry-gulched. We've tried to fight him, Bishop. But he's too big and rich. Only way to do it is to kill him. Mabel don't want me to do it—you know how wimmen are—but I aim to kill him anyway. Culp, the lowdown black rattlesnake—"

"There he is now," quietly interrupted the man who called himself George Farnley. "Step aside, Charley, and don't start anything."

There was a rattle of heavy boots across the main threshold of the saloon, and Dansby Culp with two of his cowboys—killers, rather than cowboys, they were, but they rode the broad Big C range—halted at the outer end of the bar. Charley Linster had obeyed Farnley's order; he now stood leaning unobtrusively against one of the posts that supported the roof, a full rod from the gambler's layout.

"Hiyah!" Culp's voice went booming across the gaping Spade Flush crowd. He was built very heavily, not tall, and he had beady, dark eyes and a short but thick, dark beard. His clothing, from buff Stetson hat to Spanish boots, represented a good deal of money.

"Hiyah, everybody! So that's the famous Bishop back there, is it? Been hearin' a heap about yuh, Bishop hombre, and stepped in a-purpose to see you. I'm bettin' you don't play your games square!"

Fighting talk. But George Farnley said nothing, did not move an eyelash, until Culp and his two killers had

drawn up before his table and leered.

"Hear me?" jeered Culp. "I'm bettin' you don't play square games!"

"I play square games," quietly said Farnley then. Only his bearded lips moved.

"I got a notion to take you on and see, for stakes that'll make your head swim," Culp said. "I used to be some wonder with cards myself, Bishop hombre. Could even tell fortunes—"

He broke off as the gambler's lightning-swift hands snatched a pack of cards from among the stacks of poker chips The gambler's shuffle occupied not more than three seconds. Then he dealt off ten cards to the little table, each facing upward

"There," he said, gray eyes filled with a queer mixture of craft and steel, "is all anybody needs to know about you, Culp. Want me to read it for you? Or can you read it yourself? No? Then pay close attention. That ace of spades means big trouble for you. Better change the plan you've got in your head, and change it quick. There's a tall stranger, dressed in black, and very pale, not far from here. You—er, you haven't run across an hombre of that description as yet, Culp, have you?"

"Nobody but you," was the belligerent answer. "You're a stranger, and you're tall and dressed in black. What kind o' damned foolishness is this, Bishop?"

"But I'm not pale," the Bishop said. "Well, I didn't think you'd take the warning, but it was the square thing to give it to you."

"Pale, f'r instance," Culp muttered, "like a hombre who's been in prison for ten or twenty years?"

The gambler nodded. At that instant one of Dansby Culp's henchmen nudged him and jerked a thumb toward the silently waiting Rocking K cowboy, Charley Linster, whose blue eyes were smouldering.

"Look, boss," the killer said, and laughed.

Culp swung his heavy gaze around. He laughed too, then said: "I heard you was gunnin' for me, kid. All right, here I am, and you can start burnin' powder whenever you feel lucky enough!"

He made no move toward the ivory-handled big gun he carried leathered under his thick, right hip. His two men would take care of the proddy young Rocking K rider. Linster had gone ashen under his rich tan. Rage was tearing down his better judgment. Fast with weapons though he was, they'd get him, of course. But he'd have a fine chance of getting Culp while they were doing it.

His gun hand blurred toward his holster. The gun hands of Culp's two favorite killers blurred toward theirs. None of them, and none of the watching, slack-jawed crowd, had seen George Farnley move. And yet, there stood George Farnley with a pair of double-action .41 Colts covering Dansby Culp and his men neatly!

"Put your guns up," the Bishop clipped. "You too, kid."

They did, but with poor grace. Then Culp was snarling: "You, Bishop hombre. You'll find it never pays to horn in to matters I'm concerned with. You're that same stranger you mentioned, yeah. Think you're smart as hell, don't you? We'll see who's smart, and who ain't."

He beckoned to his men, and with them turned for the street. The satin-smooth voice of the gambler overtook him.

"The stranger I warned you about is pale."

"You'll be," Culp flung back, "when I'm through with you!"

QUICKLY then, Farnley caught the bartender's eye, motioned for him to take charge of the stacks of chips, seized Linster's arm and hurried him into the blackness of the alleyway. The cowboy understood readily. They'd be shot from windows

if they remained inside the saloon.

Once in the gloom of a vacant lot, George Farnley whispered: "Where's your horse, kid?"

Linster whispered back: "Liveryman's. Why?"

"So's mine," the Bishop said. "I'm riding to the Rocking K with you. Maybe there's something else you can tell me as we ride."

Linster's horse was a lank roan, Farnley's a rangey black. The two men had just left the outskirts of Hondo City behind, when Charley asked: "You tryin' to throw a scare into Culp, or what?"

"Heard me tell him it was the square thing to warn him, didn't you?" The older man seemed a little displeased. "Now tell me anything you think I don't know. What has become of Mabel Kernan's folks?"

"Well," Linster answered, "her mother lives with her, and she's got two sisters who married and went to Texas. Fine woman, Miz Kernan. But Mabel's dad, Jim Kernan—he was a wild one, Bishop. Got killed in a Border scrap, long time ago. Shot up so bad they didn't even bring him home, but buried him there. But Miz Kernan went down to see him, and make sure there was no mistake about it bein' him. Must 'a' been a tough job, Bishop."

"Must have been, Charley," the Bishop agreed. "Maybe we'd better not take the road out to the Rocking K. It would be just like Culp and his sidewinders to drygulch us."

"Just thinkin' that same thing," Linster said. "Pull off to the left there, through the sage. Moon's comin' up, I notice."

It was almost full, and very bright. After half an hour, it showed the cowboy that George Farnley was unbuttoning his vest and shirt, and taking from around his bare middle a wide and heavy money-belt. Farnley pressed it into Linster's hands.

"Eight thousand dollars cash," said Farnley. "Give it to Mabel and her mother. They might think you've robbed somebody, so maybe you'd better tell her it was money that I owed to Jim Kernan, with interest to date, and see that you make the tale stick."

Charley Linster crammed the heavy belt inside his shirt, then began to stare at the gambler's profile, plain in the light of the moon. The face of the gambler looked almost white above his old-bronze beard. Suddenly Linster was gasping:

"Say, I—I'm bettin' that Wild Jim Kernan didn't die at all, but only put out word that he did—bettin' that Miz Kernan was somehow mistaken—bettin' that you're Wild Jim yourself! You felt that you'd disgraced your family, didn't you? Wearin' that fine beard and mustache for a sort o' disguise, ain't you? Well, after ten or fifteen years, I reckon it's a cinch that nobody'd know you!"

Rarely had the Bishop's voice been so quiet or so satin-smooth: "Just don't bet on that too much, cowboy."

"It couldn't be," Linster burst out a moment later, grasping at a wild conclusion, "that you're the hombre who killed Wild Jim and are now tryin' to pay a little o' the debt you owe Mabel and Miz Kernan! Could it?"

To this there was no answer.

THEY rode on in silence. They came to a cottonwood-lined creek and forded it, then followed the stream until they had reached the vicinity of weatherbeaten, old ranch buildings set among pepper trees, palo verdes, and blooming retamas.

About two hundred yards to the northward from the ranch house, there was a ragged stand of oaks, which stood out with almost photographic distinctness in the moonlight. Back of the oaks, equally plain to the eyes of the two newcomers, there was five saddled horses, one man with

them. Had Linster and Farnley ridden in the direct way, they wouldn't have seen that!

"Dans Culp is pretty smart, kid," half whispered Farnley. "He guessed that you wouldn't take the road, going home, and brought four of his gun-fighters clean out here to make sure they got you! Which shows that he's afraid of you. That's Culp, there with the horses. Keeping his own hide safe, the big rat. His four rattlesnakes are somewhere in the shrubbery around the houses, waiting to murder you. Well, wait here, Charley."

"Like hell I'll wait here!" Linster's low voice was brittle. "I'll not—What're you doin'. Bishop, you locoed—"

In one lightning-quick movement, George Farnley had snatched the Rocking K cowboy's old gun out of leather, and had tossed it far into the creek underbrush!

"I think I can settle this whole matter before you find that gun, kid," he said, and sprang out of his saddle and dropped rein.

He drew his pair of fast, hawkbill-handled .41 Colts, and went swiftly, bent low and keeping to all available cover, toward the ragged group of oaks. Swearing under his breath, Linster tossed his rein over the roan's head, and then was on the ground and racing to look for his six-gun. Except for a tiny golden fleck of moonlight here and there, the undergrowth was in deep shadow, and finding the weapon promised to be difficult. He kept swearing to himself as he searched.

Then he heard the voice of the man whom Hondo City had nicknamed "the Bishop," and it was now neither quiet nor satin-smooth.

"Pull your hardware, Dans Culp, you thief and hog, and pull it damned fast—"

Culp did pull it fast. *Whamm!*—came out of the vitals of his big, ivory-handled Colt. He was a good shot. But the Bishop knew a trick or so about gun-fighting. He dropped neatly under the heavy, whizzing slug. Instantly then, one of the two .41 hawkbills flamed and roared, and Dansby Culp wilted earthward.

"Come on, the rest of you rattlesnakes!" defiantly yelled George Farnley.

Four men burst from the ranch house shrubbery as though they had been catapulted. Their forms were even clearer in the moonlight than Culp's had been. They saw the low, dark shape of a man on one knee, and they knew that Dans was not wearing black. The dark shape barked at them:

"Last chance, hombres—hands straight up, or I'll burn you all down!"

"Not if we know it—"

Bra-a-a-ang! An almost continuous roar, as four six-guns spouted flame and lead. It drowned the lesser explosions of the hawkbills. The Bishop kept moving, and was a difficult target.

Bra-a-a-ang!

Suddenly, there was silence, aching, stark, grim silence.

Charley Linster at last had found his Colt. Like a buck deer he ran toward the stand of oaks.

From the ranch house ran two women. One was young, winsome and pretty. The other, in her forties, was half-buxom and more than ordinarily handsome. Cowboys were hurrying from the bunkhouse.

"Charley!" cried Mabel Kernan. "Charley!"

"Go back, honey!" cried Linster.

But the women went on. They saw Charley snatching guns out of the sand near four prostrate erstwhile killers, and then they saw him running toward a prostrate figure in black.

"Bishop!" Linster was saying. In spite of him, his voice shook. "My gosh—you got 'em all, every one!"

George Farnley sat up dizzily. He mumbled: "Four years as crack shot in a Wild West show, Charley. Dans Culp—saw him move—not quite sure about him, Charley, so you better—watch him."

The Bishop now was struggling to his feet. His face was pale in the moonlight. A ragged, dark streak ran down his left temple to be lost in the old-bronze beard. But it was not a serious wound. He steadied himself and, with Linster, went toward the supine, heavy figure of Dansby Culp. The two women followed, both wondering and silent. Behind Mabel and her mother came cowboys, and they, also, were wondering and silent.

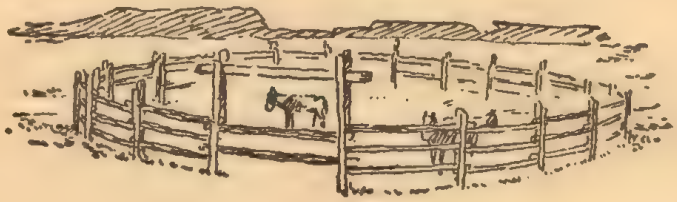
The Bishop knelt beside Culp. The Bishop spoke.

"I gave you the first shot, Dans. I shot your men in defense of myself. No witnesses, but—what were you doing here with your killers, if it wasn't that you meant to drygulch Charley Linster? There'll be no trouble with the law, Dans. Not with you dead. You don't own the law. Not now, you don't. You don't own anything now. That bullet is too close to your rotten heart. You—"

His wife flung herself into his arms. "Jim, I'd know your voice after a thousand years, and I'd know you in a dozen beards! I—I couldn't look at the shot face of that man on the Border, so long ago. But he had on clothes like you, and a watch like yours, and they swore it—was you. You've come back to stay, honey, haven't you?"

"It's more than I'd hoped for," said Jim Kernan, alias George Farnley, alias "the Bishop." He hurried on, feelingly: "Of course, I'll stay if you'll let me, and I'll be a new Jim Kernan, too!" He found his daughter, also, in his arms. Charley Linster stood blinking a queer dimness from his eyes.

There was Dansby Culp's weak and half-delirious voice: "One pale stranger. . . . The cards had it right. I see him now. . . . Tall, dressed in black, like—you said, Bishop hombre. *Named Death. . . .*"



SOLITARY STRAY

Coe, muttering in a confused, broken stream and not knowing it, lifted the limp girl who looked like a trampled flower. He did not look at the dim outline of Hagan's body.

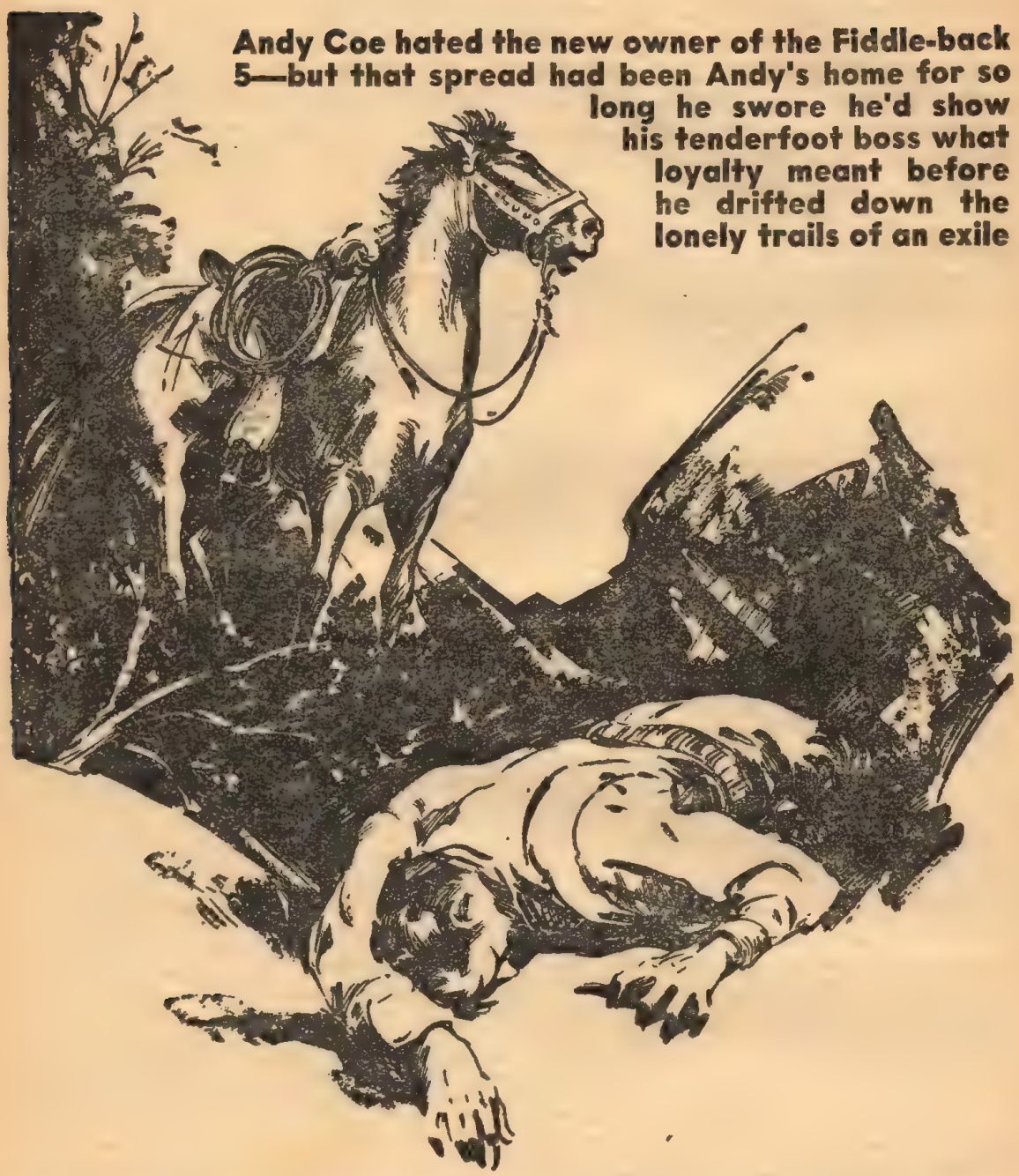
CHAPTER I
Loco Talk

YOU'RE a howlin's disgrace to the Fiddle-back Five," said Andy Coe bitterly. "You're a blot on its reputation. If you didn't own the durn place, I'd boot you to a runnin' start an' chase you right off it."

Aylsworth Pecheson-Lord replied with a gentle snore. He lay on his bed where Coe had pitched him, very limp, very peaceful, and very, very drunk. His pink face and fair hair made him look almost like a sleeping cherub, but not to Andy Coe.

"The laughin' stock o' Salina. That's you." Coe jerked off the slumberer's natty boots and flung them under the bed. It would do young Pecheson-Lord good to hunt for them. Give him exercise. "They trim you clean ev'ry time you amble down there. The whole damn town licks its chops when you

By L. L. Foreman



Andy Coe hated the new owner of the Fiddle-back 5—but that spread had been Andy's home for so long he swore he'd show his tenderfoot boss what loyalty meant before he drifted down the lonely trails of an exile

come sashayin' down the street."

Aylsworth Pecheson-Lord smiled in his sleep, mumbled something, and turned over. The morning sun, streaming through the windows, shone on his bright curly hair and made him look more cherubic than ever. Only the faint shadows of dissipation under his eyes belied the reposed innocence of his handsome young face.

"Me—dry nurse to a wet cub!" Andy Coe swore, slate-gray eyes somber with wrath. He rested his big fists on his lean hips and cast a disgusted look about the room.

Fancy eastern clothes hanging in

queer do-funnies that kept them pressed. Bright yellow baggage fashioned of leather hide that no honest cow had ever owned. Pictures of very girly-looking girls in what seemed to be their underwear, though Coe wasn't sure, never having seen anything quite like it. Even the dames in Tony Jack's place covered themselves up more than that.

Each picture bore a penned endearment. "'To darling Peachy'," murmured Coe, his long jaws moving with the words. "'To my dear Peachy'. Huh! 'To Peachy, with all my—' Pah!" He wheeled, glared at Pecheson-Lord. "Peachy! Awner o' the biggest cattle outfit in Cochise County, an' they call him Peachy! Of all the—"

"Tha's ri'." Pecheson-Lord opened vacant, wandering blue eyes. "Tha's me. Peachy." He raised himself up on one elbow, wobbled, and fell back again. "You don' like me, do you, Coe? 'S'too bad. I think we'll have to—hic—terminate relations. H'm? Don' wan' any man working for me that don' like me. Have to—hic—make a change."

"Eh?" Coe stalked back to the bed. "You mean I'm fired?" In spite of himself, a cold finger tugged inside of him. The Fiddle-back Five was his home, his world, and had been since gangling boyhood. "You mean—heck, he's asleep again. Goin' to make a change, eh? Well, I might've expected it. That means I'm—now, what the blazes?"

SOMEBODY was clumping up the stairs in a hurry, spurs jingling, yelling before he reached the room.

"What d'ya know! What d'ya know! Hey, Andy—know what's happened?"

"Why wouldn't I?" snorted Coe. "Didn't I have to go down again to Salina 'smornin' an' pour him into the buckboard? Yeah, me—range boss o' the Fiddle-back! Him—owner! An' all Salina standin' round laughin' as we pulled out. Heck, that ain't news, Opie. It's the fifth time in two weeks he's—"

"It ain't thet, Andy—it ain't thet." Opie Womble, scraggly and wizened, looked around for a place to spit his chew. There were no cracks in the floor, so he chose an ornate cigarette box that lay open on the shining new dressing table. "They jest carried Joe Cannon into the bunkhouse."

"Eh? Is he drunk, too?" Coe's saddle-hued face took on a deeper shade. "Well, I'll be—! What's this outfit comin' to?"

"Wait a minute, Andy. Fer gosh sake, I know yuh got plenty trouble, but wait'll yuh hear." Opie Womble sniffed at a cut glass bottle, found it held toilet water, and wrinkled his broken old nose. "Joe ain't drunk. He's shot. Coupla the boys went lookin' for him when he didn't turn up fer breakfast, an' found him tryin' to crawl home. He'd been crawlin' fer hours, an' he's kinda tuckered out."

"Where'd they find him?"

"'Bout a mile this side o' Piute Hill. He was night-hawkin' thet bunch o' grown stuff yuh was gradin' up over there, 'member? An' the cows is gone. Ev'ry last durn—"

"Huh? What's that? Cows gone?" The lounging disgust left Coe. His six feet of large-boned frame straightened with a jerk. "More trouble, by—! They got to be rounded up in a hurry. I don't want 'em mixin' with the other herds."

"No danger o' thet," said Opie, squinting his disapproval of the drunken young owner on the bed. "They been took, Andy. Yep, rustled. Thet's how come Joe got his slug. He says he thinks 'twas the Tresca bunch did it. He got a look at one—"

"The Trescas? Dammit, is that gang come to pester us now?" Coe clapped his battered hat on his reddish, unruly hair, and ran a hand over his cartridge belt. "Call out all hands, Opie."

"I done called 'em already."

"Tell 'em to saddle their best nags. We're goin' after that bunch."

"They're saddled, Andy. All ready to ride."

"Why'n't you say so? Stallin' round here! C'mon!"

"Reckon we oughta send word to the sheriff an' have him—?"

"Heck with the sheriff. No time. I'll bust up that bunch an' sheriff 'em after! Huh—nerve of 'em. Stealin' from the Fiddle-back!"

"An' pluggin' poor Joe." Opie wagged his bald head as he followed Coe down the stairs.

"Eh? Joe? Oh—sure. Yeah—pluggin' Joe, too." Coe clucked his tongue. "They'll ruin those cows if they push 'em hard. The Trescas, eh? H'm. Thought the last o' that ornery tribe got wiped out last year in that border blow-up."

"Still one or two left," puffed Opie, his short, bowed legs scissoring fast to keep up with Coe's long stride. "Drake Tresca an' a youngun, I hear. Got a mess o' gunnies an' cow-thieves ridin' with 'em. Bad bunch. Musta got too hot for 'em on the border."

"We'll heat it up for 'em here too," growled Coe.

HE had put in a lot of time and thought in grading up that bunch of cattle. A blow at the Fiddle-back Five was a blow at him. He took deep though unspoken pride in managing the mammoth outfit. The Fiddle-back was his life's anchor, and had been since Whisky Bill Fogarty, the late lamented owner, had hired him on as a boy.

The death of Whisky Bill had hit Coe hard, as it had hit all the Fiddle-back hands. Though it had happened a year before, a faint air of mourning still hung over the Fiddle-back. The mourning had not been lifted by the arrival of Aylsworth Pecheson-Lord, who had come gaily from the east as the new owner.

Young Pecheson-Lord, who had never heard of the great Bill Fogarty until notified by lawyers that he was the lucky heir, had promptly proceeded to explore the night-life of the surrounding territory, with much financial benefit to sundry harpies of the bright lights, and much shame to the Fiddle-back Five, which had certain cherished traditions to uphold.

The traditions were: that the big boss of the Fiddle-back Five be able to out-drink, out-poker, out-shoot and beat up any man in Salina foolish enough to take him on as per the late Mr. William Fogarty; that no Fiddle-back man, least of all the owner, should ever be seen so drunk as to be unable to mount his or somebody else's horse and ride home unaided.

There were minor points of reputation to keep up, too. Such as the unwritten law that a Fiddle-back man, being what he was, should always remember that he was the cream of the earth, one of the chosen, and act accordingly.

Young Pecheson-Lord had scuttled all the proud principles since he came. He got drunk, frequently and publicly. Not merely drunk, but dead drunk, so that he had to be carried home by shamed Fiddle-back hands. Every time he got into a poker game all Salina declared a dividend. He never wore a gun, and his fists were at their best when gripped purposefully around a glass and the edge of the bar. He threw uproarious saloon parties, fraternized with worthless gamblers and flatterers, and had even been known to crack jokes about the Fiddle-back Five. And the town of Salina, long jealous of the once-proud Fiddle-back, made the malicious most of it.

LEADING his troop of twenty-odd hands, Coe threw up his hand for a halt as they drew near Piute Hill. Here, the lowlands pressed into the hill, making a rough horse-shoe that often had been used for handily holding a bunch of cattle. The horse-shoe was empty and silent now, with only the trampled earth to show that it had ever been occupied.

"Tracks lead southwest," said Coe. "'Bout ten or fifteen men, I'd say. They'll be headin' for the border by way o' the Mule Range, followin' the foothills. Stony ground thereabouts, an' plenty rough country where they can split up if they have to. Eh, Opie?"

"Uh-huh." Opie Womble squinted his faded eyes against the sun's glare. "If they git beyont Musket Ridge, we might's well give up an' go back home. Yuh could hide half the cows in Arizona down there, an' never find 'em again."

"Right." Coe shook up his mount and gave the forward signal. "We'll streak it straight for Musket Ridge by way o' the Flats. Might cut 'em off 'fore they get there, if we're lucky. All right, fellers—all cinched tight? It's goin' to be a long haul an' no halts."

It was high noon before the long, serrated comb of Musket Ridge showed its black outline above the south horizon. It stretched in a broken, ragged line from the distant blue of the Mule Range across into the dry sand-lands of the lower Flats.

Dust-covered, their horses sweaty and laboring, the Fiddle-back troop swung west in a wide arc in response to Coe's signalling arm. Coe, out front, shaded his eyes and peered for tracks. There were none, nor any sign of moving dust clouds. He slowed his mount and let the others catch up.

"Spread out," he called over his shoulder. "Post y'selves along the ridge an' keep an eye to the north. Mebby we've beat 'em down here. They can't make fast time with those cattle. If any o' you see tracks, come back an' report. Opie, you trail with me. We'll work north along the foothills an' see can we find any sign."

Opie spat an amber stream at a skittering sand lizard. "Yuh don't reckon," he suggested hopefully, "we oughta give our nags a rest first? There's a bit o' shade over—"

"No," said Coe. "You'll get plenty rest an' shade when we bury you."

"Thet," sighed Opie, "is what I figgered. Yo're nigh as hard a man-driver as Whisky Bill was. Reminds we—what're we gonna do 'bout thet young squirt?"

"Peachy?" Coe spat the name as though it puckered his mouth. "Durned if I know. He must know it twists our insides to see him—boss owner o' the Fiddle-back—actin' up the way he does. I won't have to be frettin' 'bout him an' the outfit much longer, though."

"Huh?" Opie shot a dismayed look at him. "Yuh ain't quittin', Andy? Gosh sakes, yuh can't! Yuh jest can't! Yuh belong here, Andy, like me. It'd be a—a dirty trick on the outfit. Old Whisky Bill'd turn over in his grave!"

"No, I ain't quittin'," growled Coe. "I'm bein' fired! Yeah, fired. C'mon."

They rode a mile, seeking sign and finding none. Womble, his thoughts on two subjects, divided his conversation equally between them. "Mebby they cut straight west an' hit fer Frijo Pass. Accidents happen. Like if we could git him to try sittin' on a real mean hoss. Ever see thet saddle he brung down? No bigger'n a Mex paper dollar, an' 'bout as good. If they try crossin' the San Rafael they'll have plenty grief. He's the wust specimen o'—whatcha lookin' at, Andy?"

"If you could get your tongue an' eyes to swap jobs," said Coe, "you'd be—hell, don't you see? Dust haze, just liftin' to sight. They're comin'! We guessed right. Cut back, pronto, an' pass word to the boys to huddle down an' get ready."

"Goin' right now, Andy—goin' right now!" Opie slung his horse around. "But ain't yuh comin' back too?"

"Not right this minute," grunted Coe. "I'm aimin' to lope into the hills an' wait till they get by. I'll be behind em, then, an' cut 'em off. Nervy damn cow-thieves!"

HE heeled his tired horse to a lope, picked out an arroyo bed that cut down through the hills, and kept close to its sheltered, winding course. Past the first crotch, he swung out of the arroyo, forced his mount up the lee side of a stone-slippery hill, and halted near the rounded top. He left the horse and crawled the rest of the way on hands and knees, keeping well below the skyline.

He rolled a thin smoke while he took stock, and estimated the probable course of the oncoming dust cloud. The moving bodies that made it showed as a waving black line. It would be an hour or more before they got within gun range, even at that fast gait.

They were making fast time, considering they had two hundred head of stock to handle. Coe scowled as he thought of the hard-pushed cattle. He edged to higher ground, and looked south. He could see the Fiddle-back hands hastily stringing out and taking cover along Musket Ridge.

"Damn pity, all this waste o' time," he muttered, with a dour glance north.

He shrugged, rolled over on his back and smoked, making the most of the hour's leisure. His thoughts swung back to young Pecheson-Lord. For that worthless young pleasure-hound to be occupying the lofty niche that once had belonged to the mighty Whisky Bill was nothing less than sacrilege. And to be fired from the Fiddle-back meant the end to all things. It would mean wandering off, like an exile, leaving heart and ambition behind. Coe jerked his thoughts back to the present, blinding his mind's eye to the black vision.

CHAPTER II
Trapped

HE did not light another qu'rly, for fear of the smoke's being seen, but lay with his hat over his eyes. It seemed a long time before a swelling rumble reached his listening ears. He lifted his head and peered north.

The lumbering cattle were in full sight now, stirring up great billows of dust as they hit the wide alkali patches. Here and there, barely visible through the thick haze, horsemen weaved back and forth behind the driven bunch. Coe tried to count the riders and figured their number at around a dozen.

"C'mon, you night-birds," he muttered. "C'mon an' eat lead!"

He ducked lower as they came thundering on, until he could see only a scant view of the lifting dust, and a clear patch off to his right near the foot of the hill. The leaders of the herd went bolting by, horns lowered and tongues hanging. The main body swept past next, bellowing and trampling in a storming mass of reddish-brown shapes and fear-glaring eyes.

A rider cut across Coe's vision, then another, swinging rope-ends and yelling like fiends. Others followed fast, rocketing along and pressing hard on the heels of the stampeded cattle. The swirling dust almost obscured them, but Coe caught a flash of a face as one turned to stare back north.

"If that ain't Hagan," grunted Coe, "then I need specs. So he's joined up with the Trescas, huh?" The lean, hawkish face of Hagan graced a wanted notice outside the Salina sheriff's office.

The dust began to settle. No more riders cantered past. Coe eased his long body up, stared south and grinned. The Tresca men were working like fury, guiding the plunging cattle toward the nearest gap through the ridge. Old Opie, wise to fighting ways, would know enough to hold up the Fiddle-back fire until the cattle were through.

"Trapped!" Coe nodded his grim satisfaction. "They're as good as

trapped. All right, Opie, you old warhorse—now's the time!" He stood up, whipped out his gun, and fired a single shot.

As though he had pressed the triggers of a dozen guns, a snapping volley cracked out along the ridge. Heads and shoulders bobbed up against the polished sky, the sun sending thin glints along gunbarrels that coughed little balls of smoke.

The Tresca gang, pushing hard for the gap after the cattle, burst apart. Horses reared to the savage tug of reins, their dust-covered riders chopping shots back up the ridge. Half of them made a dash for the shelter of an overhanging bank. Two slipped from their jolting saddles, their mounts tangling with the others.

The gunfire increased. Some of the Fiddle-back hands jumped up in plain view, blazing fast down the ridge at the scattered gang. The undersized figure of old Opie flashed up as he changed position, a rifle whanging in his hands.

COE bounded to his horse, vaulted aboard, and dug in his heels, reining the animal across the slant of the hill. A swift thudding of hoofs beat out as he loped over the hill's shoulder, and he threw his body to one side as a gun spat close by.

Two riders, racing back the way they had come, did not change course as he careened down the hill. One, tall and rakish in black silk shirt and flaming red bandana, had a smoking gun raised in his hand for another shot. Cool, white teeth gleaming in a smile, he took sight and fired again.

Coe said, "Damn!" He clutched at his saddle horn, held on tight, and fought against tearing pain that sent shudders through his long body. He felt as though the top of his head had exploded and blown off his hat.

Dimly, through pain-clouded eyes, he was aware that the two riders flashed by. His horse went plunging on down the hill, slipping and sliding in the loose stones, and loped aimlessly on when it reached the bottom.

Coe dragged it to a halt. He raised the pain-ridden lump that was his head, wiped blood from his eyes with a fumbling hand, and stared about him, half dazed. A few men were riding off along the foot of Musket Ridge, hugging what cover they could. The Fiddle-back hands, all standing up, were taking potshots at them. A little bow-legged figure, arms waving, was shouting something.

"Hey, Andy! Whassa matter, huh? Whassa matter? Hey, whassa—"

"I wish," mumbled Coe, "I knew." He was not aware that his voice could not be heard ten yards away. "I wish you'd shut up. I wish that grinnin' monkey would break his neck an' go to—uh!"

He came to himself with a start and a snarl. "Grinned at me! Shot me an' grinned at me! Why, the—!"

He kicked the horse under him, whirled it half around, and sent it into a startled gallop along the edge of the foothills. Glaring, his mind foggy with pain and rage, he sighted the two riders as they rounded an outjutting hill, and started off after them in hot pursuit. Behind him, thin and distant, the cracked voice of Opie Womble still cried out its query.

"Whassa matter, Andy? Whassa matter? Hey—!"

Andy Coe heeled his horse on, still talking to himself. "Me there to flank 'em—an' I let myself be shot like a rabbit! Shot me an' grinned!" A truant shred of reason made him feel his holster. It was empty. He had dropped his gun back there, when the bullet scalped him. It didn't seem to matter. He felt as if his fury would be weapon enough to shrivel any man, gun or no gun.

THE foothills dropped away toward the west, leaving a wide level stretch of the encroaching Flats. A

mile ahead, crossing it at an angle that would take them into the high country of the rocky Mule Range, loped the two Tresca riders. They looked back, saw him, and the tall one waved a mocking salute. The other, small and slight, repeated the gesture.

Coe, head splitting, wanted to shake his fist, but he was holding his saddle-horn with one hand and handling the reins with the other. Gradually, the numbness began to clear from his brain. The leaden feeling at the back of his neck gave way to a sharp throbbing. Blood had dried on his hair and face, making him itch. From the way it felt, the sun was burning right through his head onto the roof of his mouth.

He wanted a drink. He wanted a gun. He wanted to get his hands on the man in the black shirt. And then he wanted a cool bed in a quiet place.

"Got to catch that feller," he said, loud and clearly, and the sound made him take fresh grip of himself. It was bullet-shock talking. He would have to watch that. He nodded, frowning after the two riders. Bullet-shock and delirium made a man do crazy things. Like drink. Like Pecheson-Lord. Peaches. No, Peachy.

"Peachy. To Peachy, with love." The memory amused him now. His head seemed queerly light, as though it were floating several feet above his shoulders. He laughed, scowled at the two riders, and spoke severely to his steaming horse.

"Quit tryin' to lag, Peachy. We've got to catch those fellers. To Peachy, with love. In their underwear. All grinnin'. Shot me an' grinned at me. Shut up, Opie. You talk too much."

He was gaining, no doubt of it. "Sure," he said, arguing with himself. "Why wouldn't I? Their nags are more petered out than this'n. I think I'll take his head when I catch him. I need one. Mine's sorta lost. Gun too. An' my job."

A lucid streak found its way through his foggy musings, and he clamped his wide mouth tight. They were going to beat him to the high hills, in spite of all he could get out of his horse. It would be hard trailing, once they got into the Mules. They might bush up somewhere and wait for him. He would have to look out for that.

The two riders looked back again, just before they urged their foundering mounts up and over a long knoll. They didn't wave this time. Coe, reaching the knoll minutes later, crossed in their tracks. Beyond lay a series of high cliffs, notched into the towering hills by rockslides.

Too sheer to climb, afoot or on horse. They would work along the bottom, keeping to the thick brush and great piles of tumbled rock, until they found a break.

With an effort, Coe kept his senses, fighting down a wave of giddiness that threatened to topple him out of the saddle. He forced his mount on down the other side of the knoll, and pushed on through the scattered brush, eyes strained alert for signs of ambush.

Muffled by distance, a stone rattled somewhere. A hoof had displaced it. That meant they were close to the cliffs and moving on. Coe kept to the brush, choosing high mesquite patches and tall, bunched yucca to shield himself and horse. He reached a thick clump of manzanita, pushed on through it, and found a wide barranca dipping beyond, with only sparse grama grass for cover.

He pulled up and listened. Distinctly, several stones rattled down an incline somewhere not far ahead. Then more, and the sound of a floundering body.

"Can't make it, Steve?" The voice was not hushed. "All right. We'll have to stick to the horses. Let's go."

Hoofs clattered for an instant on rock, then beat a muffled drumming on sand. Coe slipped out of the saddle,

caught his balance as he reeled a little, and bent low. He laid an ear to the ground and listened. The beat of the departing hoofs ceased after a few seconds.

ANDY rose to his knees, thoughtful. It was just possible that he had been meant to hear that voice. It was just possible that a trap lay ahead for him. They didn't know he had no gun. One, perhaps, had ridden off a short way with the two horses. The other one might be waiting in hiding.

Coe studied the shallow barranca. To try crossing it here, with a man waiting and watching over gunsights from the other side, was suicidal. He looked to left and right. To the left only the bare foot of the cliff. To the right, a hundred yards away, a few dwarfed oak broke their tops above the grama grass.

He backed into the thick manzanita, left his horse, and made his way toward the right. Crawling through the grama grass, taking all the cover he could from the scrub oaks, he had to pause again to battle with giddiness. He went on, gained the far side of the barranca, and wished once more for his gun.

A rest, and he forced himself to go on, heading for the spot where he judged the horses had halted. It would be quite a way off, he figured, somewhere in soft sand. It would be the little fellow who had taken them. The tall, black-shirted gun-swift would be guarding the back-trail.

Coe pressed on, easing his long figure through the brush as silently as he could, and following the foot of the cliff. Everything was very quiet about him. He was wondering if he had guessed wrong when, off to his right, a bit of bright metal flashed through the thick foliage. He froze, staring at it. It was a saddle ring. He could see the latigo hanging from it.

Five minutes later, crouching on hands and knees, he peered at two horses, a bare twenty yards away. They stood with heads drooping, their reins held by the smallest of the two Tresca riders, who squatted cross-legged on the ground, back turned.

Coe studied the small figure. A cartridge belt, made for a much bigger man, was wrapped twice around the slim waist, with a holstered gun hanging from the man's right side. A hand rested lightly on the big butt. Coe gradually rose to his feet and crept forward. He wanted that gun. He wanted it, to match shots with that black-shirted gun-devil who lay waiting somewhere back near the barranca.

Coe, his ears ringing with the throb of his bullet-creased head, barely heard the crack of a rotted twig beneath his own boot. The guardian of the horses made a twisting upward leap, like a wild thing startled, and faced Coe.

"Drake—quick!" The big gun swung up clear of its holster as the high cry broke the quiet. "Here he—!"

Coe dodged as the gun roared, caught his balance, and charged. The hammer was lifting for a second shot when he drove a solid fist at the face under the wide-brimed hat. He missed, the face ducking swiftly, but his hard knuckles punched the hat out of shape and cracked against bone.

A small, moaning sigh, and the horse-guard went down on buckled knees and slowly pitched over. Coe scooped up the fallen gun, dropped it again, the fingers of his right hand numbed by the punch. He snatched it up with his left, and crouched, eyes flickering over the wall of tangled brush around him.

Somewhere a body came crashing through branches, and paused. "Steve! Where are you? Did he get you?" The voice barked the words, staccato and urgent.

"Yeah, I got him, Tresca!" Coe sent his answer in a harsh drawl. He weaved the gun over the brush, waiting. "C'mon out, feller. You're as good

as jailed. I'm here with your horses, an' my boys ought to be comin' along after me any minute now. Come out with your hands clean, Tresca!"

"What? Me?" An oath, and a reckless laugh. "Hell, man, you're crazy! The Trescas don't do that. I've been in tighter places than this, an' got through. Back up, cowboy—I'm coming!"

"An' I'm waiting!" said Coe. He tried to judge direction by the voice, tried to figure out at what point Drake Tresca would come out, but gave it up. The Trescas were tricky veterans of violence, always at their trickiest when hard pressed, always pulling the unexpected. Drake Tresca had survived the rest.

A MOMENT'S silence strained Coe's nerves. He crouched lower, eyes never at rest, cocked gun ready. Something thudded nearby, to the left of him. He whirled, almost pulled trigger, and saw it was a pitched stone. Swiftly he jerked his glaring attention to the right, away from the stone, expecting the crack of a gun from that quarter.

He half turned his back on the stone. Drake Tresca must have thrown it from another point, to draw his attention in the wrong direction. That meant Tresca was probably working around on the right. Coe's wide lips curved in a half sneering grin. Not a very smart trick, that. He would have thought a Tresca could think of something better, such as—

A jabbing suspicion stabbed him. He flung himself down, with a quick stare over his shoulder at the spot where the stone lay. Just beyond it, rising above a clump of cat's claw, the dark, reckless face of Drake Tresca smiled without mirth over a leveled gun.

The gun spat its licking streak as Coe rolled over. The bullet scored a furrow along Coe's lean thigh, and the burning sting of it made him roll again. He fired twice, flung himself up on his knees, and fired again, savagely furious at himself for being fooled. He saw Tresca's darkly handsome face drop down again behind the cat's claw. It dropped suddenly, as though its support had been snatched away. Coe slung another shot into the cat's claw, and poised his gun, waiting for another trick.

"Say—cowboy!" The voice of Tresca sounded choked, gasping. "Damned if you didn't—get me—with that—third shot. Damned if—you didn't!"

"Come out!" snapped Coe.

"Can't—do it." A weak laugh came after the words. "Where I—come from—dead men—don't walk!"

Slowly, ready to trigger again, Coe limped forward. He rounded the clump of cat's claw, halted as he saw an empty, outstretched hand on the ground, and took another step. Drake Tresca lay on his back, eyes wandering with a queer tranquility over the sky above him. He shifted his gaze as Coe loomed over him, and managed to twist his mouth into its easy smile.

"Your boys are—coming," he said haltingly. "I can—hear 'em. Funny—I was told once—the Fiddle-back Five was—poison. Put no stock in it. You've got—a good outfit—cowboy."

"We think it's fairish," nodded Coe. "That is," he added, "we useta." The man was dying, he could see that. The fury that had driven him on subsided, leaving him with a faint feeling of camaraderie for the outlaw. It was as though they had been hard rivals in a game; but now, with the game over, they could see each other as men.

He rolled a smoke, lighted it, and put it between the graying lips. Tresca looked his thanks, and inhaled. It made him choke a little, and he put a hand to his bloodied chest. "Steve—dead?" he mumbled.

Coe shook his head. "No. Just knocked out, is all."

"Might've been better if—" Tresca

inhaled again, and did not finish. "Here's your boys."

CHAPTER III
The Wildcat Stray

THEY came pouring through the brush, fierce-eyed with their hangover of bloodshed. Old Opie dropped from his horse and stared down at Tresca. "Got him, huh, Andy?" He shook his bald head, snorted. "Yo're a crazy son! Look at yuh! All messed up. Will we load this hombre on a hoss an'—?"

"Let him alone," said Coe shortly. "He wants to smoke."

Drake Tresca spat out the burning stub. "You'll have trouble—with—Steve," he whispered. "Good kid—but—wild as hell. Last—Tresca. Look out for—Hagan. He'll—kill you—for—for—"

"I reckon," muttered Opie Womble, seconds later, "he's kinda dead. He sure was a tough—hey, thet other'n's movin'!"

Coe limped over, took a fistful of loose shirt, and lifted a hundred pounds of wriggling humanity clear of the ground. "This," he announced dourly, "is Steve. Steve Tresca, reckon. Last o' the Trescas. What the blazes will I do with the young heller, anyway? Too young to sheriff him, an' mebby too old to spank!" He slowly shook the struggling body. "A hundred pounds o' pure sin, all rarin' to—"

"Hey, fer gosh sakes, Andy!" gulped Opie. Like most of the clustered Fiddle-back hands, he was staring with bulging eyes. "Quit maulin' a lady! It ain't a him—it's a she!"

"Wha—huh?" Coe swung his captive around, stared, and his long jaw sagged open. For the first time he got a good look at the face under the big crushed hat.

It was small, and had the dark, definite features of the wild Trescas. The skin, flushed and fine textured, was not heavily bronzed. It was sunned to a glowing golden tan. A pair of brilliant emerald-green eyes, vivid as colored ice, met Coe's slate-gray ones in a cool stare.

Coe looked no further than the face. He hastily let go of the shirt, stretched tight in his grip. In a hopeless effort to discredit his eyes, he lifted off the hat. A cascade of blue-black hair, lustrous and shining as silk, fell down over the slim, rounded shoulders.

"Uh!" said Coe faintly, and backed a step. The emerald eyes, flashing from that vividly beautiful little face, seemed almost to strike him. There was no fear in them, but rather cool defiance and a mocking challenge. He had never seen anyone quite so perfectly poised and in command of the situation. It rattled him, made him gape and stare like the rest of the Fiddle-back men.

"Well?" the word came like the sudden stroke of a bell.

"I—ah—h'm." Coe found his mouth open, shut it with a click of teeth, and tried to recover his old careless self-control.

"If you've finished knocking me senseless and hauling me around," said the girl calmly, "I'd like to tend to Drake." She put a hand to her head, buried it in her glossy hair, and gently rubbed. "Bullying great lout!" she added icily, and stepped around Coe.

Her small figure, dainty and dignified in spite of the oversized men's clothes, made Coe feel as blundering and awkward as a mastiff in a parlor. Her cool scorn made him feel as though he had been kicking a kitten. The top of her poised head barely came to the height of his shoulder, but he had never been quite so scared in his life.

THE girl bent over Drake Tresca, straightened up again. For a moment she looked away. "He's dead,"

she said evenly, her brilliant eyes on nothing. "You killed him."

"Uh-huh," muttered Coe, with all the ghastly feelings of a murderer. "I killed him. We—we shot it out," he added lamely. "I'm kinda sorry—I mean—I didn't—"

"It had to come sometime." The girl shrugged slightly. Her words made the men blink. Such lack of visible emotion was almost eerie. "Drake wasn't afraid to die. No Tresca has ever been afraid to die. That's why we're—different. You'll bury him?"

"Sure—sure." All heads nodded with Coe. "We'll bury him in the Salina graveyard."

"No." The girl shook her head. "Right here, please. Where he died. Drake would feel out of place in a regular graveyard. He'd be the only Tresca there."

Old Opie, scandalized, puffed out his leathery cheeks. "But—"

"Right here," repeated the girl. "At that, it'll be better than my father got. We had to leave his body in the Sonora desert, down in Mexico. The rurales were after us, and we hadn't time to dig a grave. Drake was his brother. My uncle."

Coe cleared his throat. "He called you Steve, so I thought you were a—"

"Stephanie," nodded the girl. "Stephanie Tresca. But I've always been called Steve. Made it seem like I was a man, like the rest of the bunch." She turned, laid a slow glance over them. "Anything else you'd like to know?" Her irony was hinted, rather than evident. It seemed as though she was inwardly laughing at them from a high, lofty pedestal; as though she had some secret talisman that kept her free from hurt or danger.

"Yeah," said Coe. His own embarrassment annoyed him, made him curt and blunt. "D'you know you missed me by a whisker when you cut down on me? You'd have got me full in my shirt pocket, if I hadn't dodged."

"I'm sorry," murmured Stephanie Tresca, and again felt the bruise under her thick hair. "Sorry I missed."

Coe swallowed, glared at the suspiciously straight face of Opie Womble, and hitched his belt. "Let's dig that grave," he muttered.

IT was night-fall when they got back to the Fiddle-back Five, and the ride did nothing to sweeten Coe's temper. His head ached. His leg smarted. The cattle had been hard to round up, and harder to keep moving home. On top of that, he was continually aware of Stephanie Tresca's cool, emerald eyes mocking him.

The girl walked into the big ranch house as though she were a princess deigning to visit a few of her less important subjects. Coe, big and blood-smeared, stalked in behind her. His toe itched to kick something. Opie Womble, shuffling in the rear, kept mumbling to himself as he stared at the girl's straight back. He was a privileged hand, and had the run of the house.

Aylsworth Pecheson-Lord, sprawled gracefully in an armchair with a tall filled glass, shot to his feet as they came into the long living room. He stared, his bright blue eyes widening at sight of the girl. "My word!" he breathed, and bowed, his silk lounging robe flapping around his ankles. "What have we here?"

"Steve Tresca," grunted Coe. "Yeah—Steve. Short for Stephanie. Like Peachy for Pecheson. I'll tell you all about her later. Right now I need—"

"A drink," Pecheson-Lord finished for him, and poured one. "A little for you, too, Miss—ah—Steve!" His eyes, boyish but bold with admiration, swept over the vivid face.

"Very little," said the girl. "Just enough to bathe a bruise."

Coe winced, downed his drink in a hasty swallow that made him choke. "You can put up here tonight," he

said thickly. "Tomorrow we'll figure out what's to be done with you."

"A guest, by Jove!" Pecheson-Lord clapped his hands for the Chinese manservant he had brought down with him. "The first since I came. And such a charming and welcome guest, Miss Steve—if I may say so."

"You may," murmured the girl, and serenely took possession of his big armchair. She glanced from him to Coe. Her cool eyes played with them. She seemed to enjoy Coe's discomfort and Pecheson-Lord's slightly puzzled wonder.

"Ah, Ting." Pecheson-Lord waved a white hand to his padding Chinaman. "Prepare a room for the lady. See that everything is very comfortable. Oh, by the way, Miss Steve—my foreman forgot full introductions. I am Aylsworth Pecheson-Lord, the—ah—owner, y'know."

"Quite a lot of name," remarked the girl, dabbing whisky under her hair.

"Some people," growled Coe, "shorten it to Peachy." He was due to be fired, anyway. It didn't matter what he said now.

Pecheson-Lord sent him a flashing smile. "My friends, yes," he nodded brightly. "I hope, Miss Steve, that you will favor me by joining that—ah—select circle, what?"

Steve Tresca rose and followed the Chinaman. At the door she paused to look back over her shoulder. Coe felt that her startling eyes were altogether too disturbing. She smiled at them, even including old Opie, who forgot to chew.

"Good night, Peachy. And you, Mr. Crow." The slow smile deepened, full of something secret, then she was gone.

PECHESON-LORD appeared to have lost his breath. He drained his glass, walked briskly up and down twice and stopped short in the middle of the floor to gaze abstractedly at Coe.

"Who the dickens is she? No, it doesn't matter. Never mind. Isn't she the most glorious thing you ever—? Such eyes! Such hair! Such—phew! I never saw such a— Have another drink, Coe. By Harry, what a girl! What—"

"Quit ravin'!" cut in Coe sourly. "That gal's a twig from a poison oak! She's a Tresca."

"Oughta lock her up in her room," observed Opie, with a nervous look at the doorway. "She's li'ble to cut all our throats while we're sleepin', an' light out on the best hoss!"

"If I ever get my throat cut," declared Pecheson-Lord fervently, "I want it done by a girl like that! Be a pleasure, I swear. By gosh, I'd like my crowd up east to see her. She'd set fire to the whole town."

"She likely would," agreed Coe drily. "An' play mumbly-peg with your bones! Listen—I'll tell you 'bout her."

He did, but ended with the grim warning that, "She's a wildcat, for all her quiet ways."

"Likely cut her teeth on a gunbar'l," added Opie. "Whatcha gonna do with her, huh? Can't let her stay here."

Coe shuddered at the thought. "Heck, no!"

Pecheson-Lord halted his pacing again. "Why not?" he demanded, and Coe didn't like the cheerful glimmer in his eyes.

"She just can't, is all," Coe snorted impatiently. "All kinds o' reasons."

" 'Sides, this here Fiddle-back's always been what yuh might call a womanless outfit," threw in Opie. "No woman's ever lived here. It—it jest wouldn't be right. Whisky Bill wouldn't never have a woman on the place, he wouldn't."

"Doddering old codger," commented Pecheson-Lord.

"The heck he was!" rapped Coe.

"Whisky Bill," said Opie with simple reverence, "was a lot o' man. Long's I knew him—forty-odd years

—he never missed finishin' his quart a day, rain or shine. But nobody," he added austerely, "ever seen him drunk. He musta felt awful peeved, fallin' down them stairs the night he broke his neck. He'd always vow'n declared he'd die in bed like a gen-'leman."

"We were proud of the old cuss," said Coe. "The whole spread was. Yeah, he had dignity an'—an'—"

"Poise?" suggested Pecheson-Lord helpfully.

"Uh-huh," grunted Opie. "He had a lot o' thet, too, he did. Kep' a case or two always on hand, an' a bottle in his pocket. Quart a day, never more nor less. Steady habits, he said, made him what he was."

"Such temperance," murmured Pecheson-Lord. "Such Spartan simplicity. Well, anyway, our little guest stays here for as long as she cares to brighten our dull lives. Do I—ah—make myself understood, Mr. Coe?"

"You do," said Coe. "Too damned well understood! You're invitin' trouble, mister. I got a notion she's Hagan's girl, an' that means more trouble. As for me, I'm goin' down to Salina in the mornin', an' bring back the sheriff. We'll see what he's got to say."

BUT the sheriff, next morning, took one long look at Stephanie Tresca and hurriedly disclaimed all responsibility in the matter. He had a wife and two daughters. Also a young and light-headed son.

"Y'see, Andy," he explained carefully as he mounted to ride away, "I'm only a lawman. I ain't no guardeen for lost, stolen or strayed gals. Nor I ain't a animal trainer, neither. Can't put her in jail, like she was a man. No, Andy, it ain't no job o' mine."

"But what the heck are we goin' to do with her?" demanded Coe, and fervently wished he had let Drake Tresca get clear.

"Wa-all, I don't rightly know." The sheriff rubbed his chin, edging his horse away. "Looks to me like it's yore affair, Andy. Yores an' the Fiddle-back's. Yuh made her a stray, sort of, when yuh cut down Drake. Yuh brung her here. I—er—I gotta go, Andy. S'long." He left with unseemly haste.

Coe stalked back across the sun-baked yard. He was baffled. The sounds of laughter inside the house made him scowl. The girl and Pecheson-Lord were having breakfast together. They seemed to be very gay and congenial.

"Birds of a feather," growled Coe, and nodded moodily to old Opie, coming around the house. "Not a speck o' responsibility in the pair of 'em."

"Say, Andy." Opie looked dolefully at him. "Know what I jest heard 'em say? They're both traipsin' down to Salina today. She dared him, an' he took her up on it right away."

"Eh? They're—what?" Coe held his aching, bandaged head.

"Thet ain't all," moaned Opie. "Then they started chuckin' spoons inter coffee mugs, to settle a bet. Peaches was bettin' her the price of a whole outfit o' woman's frills. Dunno what she bet."

"She—?" Coe grabbed him by the shoulder. "Who won?"

"Good gosh, Andy! Don't maul me thataway." Opie wriggled loose. "She did. Then she laughed at him. I'm to saddle a pair o' nags fer 'em. It's bad 'nough when he goes into town, anyway. But with her with him—!" He wandered over to the corral, shaking his head.

Coe stormed on into the house and confronted the pair. They were still laughing, though Pecheson-Lord's laugh seemed a trifle forced. "Say, girl, you're to stay clear of Salina, hear?" he barked.

She looked up at him, and again her sparkling emerald eyes threw his mind off track. "So?" she queried

sweetly, dangerously. "How do you plan to stop me? I heard what the sheriff said. I'm not a prisoner. And you're not my jailer, either. I'm a guest here. You're—h'm—well, one of the hired help."

"Why, I—you—!" Coe floundered.

"I say, old chap," murmured Pecheson-Lord, "aren't you a bit excited? Have a drink. Yes, I'm escorting Steve in to town. There are several things she needs. She's free to come and go as she pleases, you know. And I might remind you that I—ah—happen to own this place."

"I don't need remindin'," growled Coe, his face as red as his hair, and his temper on hair-trigger. "But if you think—"

"No need to apologize, Coe," interrupted Pecheson-Lord blandly. "Quite all right. If you have any work to do, you may—ah—go and attend to it. I don't really need any help in looking after my guest. And by the way, I want a little talk with you soon. It's about the management of this place. I don't care for things as they are, so I'm—ah—making a change."

CHAPTER IV
On the Owlhoot Trail

COE stumbled out, and Steve Tresca's musical laugh followed him. He had never been quite so sure that he wanted to choke somebody. He had never been told off so casually in his life. Whisky Bill, of revered memory, had been a champion swearer when crossed, but his cussing had been an integral part of the Fiddleback, and something more to brag modestly about. And when Whisky Bill had decided to fire a man, he had come right out and fired him, instead of hinting around.

A malicious, insinuating, snake-tongued young waster, this Pecheson-Lord. Coe kicked a chair out of his way as he stamped across the front porch. He felt thwarted, futile, belittled, and sort of lost. He took a mental look into the future, and saw the mighty Fiddle-back going to the dogs. No outsider would take the same personal interest in keeping the outfit a going concern as he had done.

The old wise hands would drift off. The old pride would evaporate. Pecheson-Lord would give crazy commands, and the new range boss would probably shrug and carry them out. Like the time he had wanted to call in all hands and throw them a party, right in the middle of round-up. It had taken a lot of talk to argue him out of that bright notion.

That Steve—that Tresca wildcat—she would turn the place into a madhouse. She would think up things for Pecheson-Lord to do, dare him into doing them, and stand off with her secret smile while he made a bigger fool of himself than he already was. Between them they would wreck the outfit in short order, and all its proud old traditions.

The thought of the girl, for some reason, gave Coe deeper anger than anything else. He wished she were a boy, so he could take her off and give her a good sound spanking. Knock some of that cool mockery out of her. The hard palm of his right hand itched to land somewhere.

An hour later he stood and watched them mount and ride off down the broad trail to Salina. The girl handled her horse with much more ease and casual expertness than did Pecheson-Lord, though Opie, with malice aforethought, had saddled her a tempery buckskin. It made Pecheson-Lord appear even more foolish by contrast, the way he bumped and jolted in the saddle as they cantered off. He usually took the buckboard. At that, the team had twice bolted with him, once right in town. All Salina had ironically cheered as he rocketed through the main street.

"There they go." Opie rolled up,

squinting moodily after the pair. "There they go, all set to show Salina somethin' fresh in the way o' devilment. I swan, I'm gettin' nigh 'shamed o' workin' here! Bunch o' them wuthless Diamond T riders hoorawed me somethin' awful, last week when I was in town. Claimed this was nothin' but an eastern-owned dude spread. Wanted to know did we boot-black the cows' hoofs, an' so forth."

LATE evening, with the sun out of sight and most of the hands lounging around the bunkhouse, Coe got up suddenly and stalked over to the corral. He was going down to Salina. He didn't exactly know what he would do when he got there, but he had to know what that pair was doing all this time. The girl was his charge, his responsibility. To blazes with Pecheson-Lord. Let him come right out and do his firing, and quit stalling along.

He saddled his big roan and heeled it to a gallop down the trail, giving no answer to the queries of the interested hands, nor to Opie's following hail. Be damned if he'd let that young cub take possession of the girl like that. They both would get to drinking. Pecheson-Lord would see to that. The girl, for all her easy confidence, was just a kid girl.

Salina seemed even noisier than ever, as Coe drew within sight and sound of it. It sounded like pay-day, though it was the middle of the month. All the town appeared to be celebrating in the lighted main street. Crowds of men swayed and mingled in groups, their figures blocking whatever was going on farther down the street.

A lot of them were cheering, yelling, laughing, shouting sarcastic encouragement to somebody. Hoofs beat a confused thudding in the dust, and part of the noisy crowd scattered.

Coe dismounted, hitched his roan, and thrust through the uproarious mob. A lot of voices followed him as he elbowed his tall frame to the front. There he stopped, stared, and his slate-gray eyes went bleak. Voices in the crowd, from men who sighted him, went on calling out humorous comment.

"Hiya, Coe! Come to take the baby home?"

"Let him be, Coe—he's a ridin' fool! Showin' us tricks, he is!"

"Fiddle-back hossmen—wah!" jeered a Diamond T hand.

Coe's face went stiff as wood. His wide mouth clamped down. His eyes veered to the front of Tony Jack's brightly lighted saloon and dancehall. Sitting balanced on the hitchrack, like a splash of rich color in her new feminine dress, Stephanie Tresca watched and smiled with the crowd. A lot of men, including Tony Jack, were clustered around her, but she paid them no attention. Her amused gaze was for Pecheson-Lord.

Pecheson-Lord, at the moment, was not laughing as far as Coe could make out. He was clinging to the buckskin, both arms wrapped around the animal's neck, and trying to stay on in favor of being tossed off, as the lesser of two evils. He was taking a terrific bouncing. The buckskin, wild-eyed and urged on by yelling men and whirling hats, plunged all over the street. It was perhaps the sorriest exhibition of horsemanship ever seen in or around Salina.

Coe had never seen worse. He flinched for the Fiddle-back's shattered reputation. The girl had ridden the buckskin, and all Salina had probably seen her do it. That girl—looking like a dream of lovely innocence, now, in her soft, full-skirted dress—was at the bottom of this.

She was looking across at him. She had heard the voices, and seen him. Coe met her clear, emerald eyes, saw the lift to the long lashes and the amused quirk to the firm red lips. She was laughing at him, including

him in her subtle ridicule of drunken Pecheson-Lord and all things of the Fiddle-back. She was taking her revenge, a more cutting revenge than any raid by her wild Tresca bunch could have inflicted.

Coe's eyes darkened almost to black. He strode forward into the cleared space in the street, and a fresh howl went up as he dodged a flashing lunge of the buckskin's hind hoofs. A sweep of his long, bone-hard arm, and he caught the flinging lines. He hauled back on them, dragged the brute's head down, and snagged it low.

Pecheson-Lord fell out of the saddle and lay on his back in the dusty street, gasping and heaving. Coe led the buckskin over to the hitchrack. He stared without expression at the girl. "Get aboard," he snapped curtly.

From her balanced perch on the rail, she looked down at him. Men nearby grew silent, inquisitive, their eyes full of questions. The girl looked very beautiful with her golden skin and raven hair. She did not look like a girl to whom men spoke with curt harshness.

"That" she murmured, "sounds like an order."

"Yeah," said Coe, and the hardness in his eyes matched his tone. "It's an order. Get aboard."

Stephanie Tresca raised her fine eyebrows, regarding his copper face with curious intentness. "My dress—"

"Too bad if it gets spoiled. But you can likely get some man to buy you another. Hagan, mebby." Coe put his big hands around her slim waist, lifted her bodily from the rail, and dropped her into the saddle of the nervously twitching buckskin. "I'm takin' you back."

A faint flush stained the smooth golden skin. The emerald eyes lost some of their surface brilliance, seemed to take on cloudy depth. She smoothed out the folds of her rumpled dress with a steady hand. "Back?" she echoed. "Back where?"

"Back where you belong," rapped Coe harshly, and had no eyes for the gaping crowd. "Back to the border and your outlaw playmates. Back to Hagan, if I can find him."

"Oh." The girl looked down at the reins in her hands. The flush drained from her face. "I see," she almost whispered.

PECHESON-LORD staggered up, clothes disheveled and dust in his fair hair. "'Lo, Coe," he mumbled thickly and managed a weak grin. He had taken a bad shaking-up and a lot of bruises. He propped his swaying body against the hitchrack breathing hard. "Where y'going?"

"None of your damned business!" grunted Coe.

"Oh but 'tis, Coe—'tis," protested Pecheson-Lord, and left the hitchrack to cling to Coe's arm. "We had a bet, Stevey and I. And I won. Stayed on a horse till—till—well, I won. Eh, Stevey?"

"That's right." The girl looked at Coe. Her eyes were veiled now, as though she had donned a mask. "Would you have me welsh on a bet?"

"Pah!" Coe thrust Pecheson-Lord from him, sent him reeling backward into the crowd. "Go hire another range-boss, you waster! I'm through. I'll cheat you of the pleasure of firin' me."

He took the buckskin's bridle, led it through the wondering crowd, and got to his waiting roan. Mounting, he kicked the buckskin into a lope and rode after it. He drew alongside the girl as they left Salina. "Any idea where we can find Hagan?" he barked harshly.

"No." The girl did not turn her head, but gazed straight forward into the night. "He may be somewhere on the border. I don't know. I've been expecting him to come for me. You're a fool, Andy Coe."

"Yeah? Mebby so." Coe, too, looked

straight ahead. "If Hagan wants to shoot it out, I'll oblige him. Got to find him first. As for Pecheson-Lord, he was goin' to fire me, anyway."

"I wasn't thinking of that. It was —something else." She turned her head, her eyes searching for his.

Coe kept his eyes front. "I'm taking you back where you rightly belong," he said, and the stiff inner fury was gone from his tone. "We all belong somewhere. When we're taken away, we—we're strays. Solitary strays. You belong to the Tresca kind of people. You'll hit hell's bottom, prob'bly, but no faster'n you would on the Fiddle-back. Mebby not as fast. An' you'll have more fun doin' it with your own kind."

"You're a stray, yourself, now, Andy Coe." It was not a taunt.

Coe nodded somberly. "Yeah, I can't change that. But I can take you back to your own people. I'll do that, if it's the last thing I do."

"Hagan will kill you," said Stephanie Tresca simply. "He'll kill you on sight. He doesn't think. He only feels, like an animal. Sometimes I think he's crazy."

"You sound," said Coe, "as though you don't like him." It was a new thought, and he pondered it, frowning.

The girl shrugged slightly. "He's my kind. You just said so." An edge of the old stinging mockery cut through her quiet voice. "Do we always like our own kind, Andy Coe?"

"Mostly." Coe still struggled with the thought.

"But not always." The Tresca girl looked front again, failing to meet his eyes. "Pecheson-Lord is not my kind, but I liked him. He was thoughtful, polite, amusing. He bought clothes for me. He made me feel that I wasn't a wild animal trapped in a cage."

She suddenly whirled back on him, face flushed, eyes glowing. "A wild animal—that's the way the rest of you made me feel!" Her voice remained quiet, yet, to Coe it had the high note of a struck blade. "You—and all the rest. Staring at me as though I were something savage that you'd caught in the jungle! Pecheson-Lord at least treated me like a human being."

"An' made a bet with you," said Coe shortly, and wanted to bite off his tongue right after.

"Yes, he made a bet with me." She laughed, regained her cool poise. "He won. I meant him to win. But I haven't settled the bet. I doubt if I'll ever settle it. Not now. You spoiled it."

"I'm not sorry," commented Coe.

THEY rode on in silence, down the dim trail that disappeared in the barren Flats. The moon came up, pale and aloof, and marked their shapes in black shadows against the brown, sandy earth. Piute Hill, round-knobbed and blunt, loomed up and passed to the rear. Coe led the way along the winding edge of the Mule foothills. He wondered how long it would take him to find Hagan.

The outlaw would likely be ranging somewhere close to the border haunts. It would not be hard to find him below the line. Everybody knew Hagan. And Hagan, once he got wind that the girl was free, would come out of hiding. He would have friends, the remnants of the Tresca bunch. He would, as the girl had said, shoot any Fiddle-back man on sight, especially the man who had killed Drake Tresca.

Coe quirked his long chin. It didn't matter. If Hagan killed him, it still didn't matter very much. Strays were never at peace away from their home range. Never happy. It was the same with some men. He was that kind of man. His whole life had been bound up in the Fiddle-back Five. He would never be happy away from it.

He wished he hadn't killed Drake Tresca. He almost wished now that

Drake Tresca had killed him. It would have been so much more simple, then. Stephanie would be with her own kind. And he wouldn't be riding along with that heavy leaden feeling in his chest. He wouldn't be going to find Hagan, a man who would shoot him on sight.

Hagan. A wave of rage at the man swept through Coe, while he wondered at it. It was senseless to feel that way about a man he'd never even met yet. He'd have to quell that, or he'd be shooting too fast. He did not intend to do any fast shooting when he met Hagan. He had killed Drake Tresca. He wouldn't kill Hagan. That would leave Stephanie all alone.

CHAPTER V
Gun-Play Fury

A HISS from the girl jerked him out of his deep musings. "Eh?" he muttered, and reined in beside her.

"Up ahead." She pointed. "Something just moved. It went behind that long rock. It looked like—listen!"

A sound behind them made both twist in their saddles. Coe dived a hand at his holster, halted the motion half way, and froze. A dozen yards away, standing still and silent in the moonlight, the dark figure of a man covered him with a leveled rifle. Another figure slipped out into view off to the right, a gun winking in the pale gray light.

"All right, feller." The lazy drawl came from the long rock up ahead, where a lean figure stood against the night sky. "Throw up the paws! You, too, lady."

"I'm no lady"—Stephanie Tresca's unruffled tone matched the cool drawl —"I'm Steve."

"Wha—what? Well, for—!" The lean shape came striding forward, lithe and quick. "Steve-gal! It sure-'nough is you! An' look at you—all dolled up. Why, gal, we just come from prowlin' round the Fiddle-back. We were lookin' for you."

"Nice of you, Hagan," murmured the girl. "We were on our way to find you."

"Yeah? Sure-'nough?" Hagan sounded pleased, incredulous. He laughed, his pale brown eyes shining almost yellow in the slanting moonlight. "Say, now, that makes me feel real good. Gal, gal—you sure are a pretty sight!" His tone subtly altered as he looked at Coe. "An' who's this? Huh? Who is he, Steve?"

"Just a friend. He—"

"So?" Hagan stepped closer, peering up into Coe's immobile face. "Just a minute, hombres—keep him covered. Sa-ay! I know you, feller. You're that Fiddle-back jasper who sprung that trap on us at Musket Ridge! I saw you! You went after Drake an'—"

"Right," nodded Coe, and felt his gun plucked from its holster by a stealthy hand behind. "I'm Coe. I shot it out with Drake. Killed him. Now I'm bringin' Steve back."

"So you're the ranny who got Drake, eh?" purred Hagan. His thin lips stretched across his dark face in a tight devil's grin. "Whyn't you say so, Steve? I don't savvy this. Comin' to find me, eh? What for? You never claimed to like me, gal. Much as I could ever do to get a friendly word out o' you. No, I don't savvy."

"I was coming back to my own kind, Hagan." The girl's tone was light, casual. "Why not? Coe came along to make sure he was rid of me."

"Pretty durn obligin', I say." Hagan flicked his pale eyes to her, grinned again. "Got homesick for me an' the bunch, eh? Gal, I always hoped you'd weaken. You ain't got nobody to look out for you now, so you fall back on me. *Bueno!*" He thumbed back the hammer of his gun. "Shift your nag, Steve. You wouldn't want this Fiddle-back trash fallin' on you when I puncture his mangy hide. Might get that pretty dress mussed up."

A husky voice behind Coe winced a request. "Me, Hagan. Let for me to keel thees wan, eh? Those Fiddleback, they for keel Jose an' Pepito an'—"

"An' Baldy John, an' Smitts, an the others," Hagan ended for him. "An' Drake. Shut up, Tino, he's mine. You an' Griff go get our horses." He stepped back a pace, still grinning his inhuman grin, and stared up into Coe's face. "Know any prayers, feller?"

"His hoss, Hagan," rumbled Griff, a drooping bear of a man. "Better hold his hoss. Might bolt when yuh shoot."

"Let it." Hagan motioned with his cocked gun. "You an' Tino get our nags, g'wan. Y'hear!"

COE heard them shuffling off, muttering together. A thought, implanted minutes before in his mind, was still taking definite shape. He looked at the gun covering his middle. It would spit his finish soon. He would not have time to figure out that thought and all it meant. His was a steady, methodical mind, not quick and impetuous.

He took his deepset eyes from the gun, looked at Stephanie. She had slipped from the saddle to the ground, and was leading the buckskin away from him. She was moving over to Hagan, smiling. Hagan, delaying his shot, was smiling back at her, his yellowish eyes flaming as he swept them over her small, graceful form.

Coe sighed, and his unfinished thought receded. He had been right about this Tresca girl. She was a wildcat under her cool surface. She would stand there, smiling, as Hagan fired. She would ride off with Hagan, then, back to the life to which she belonged. Perhaps it was better so.

Coe braced himself for the bullet. He wished now that Hagan would shoot and get it over. It hurt, somehow, to see the girl smiling like that, ranging herself beside the gunman with that brilliant light in her eyes. She was placing a slim hand on Hagan's arm, smiling up at him. She was lifting both her hands to. . . .

A shock snapped Coe's nerves taut, made him jerk rigid. The girl had dropped her languorous pose. Her slim arms had whipped around Hagan's neck, pulling the gunman off balance. She was struggling with him, fighting like a little fury.

Hagan's startled yell rang out. "Hey! What the—!"

"Quick, Andy!" The girl's cry cut across the gunman's oath.

Coe heaved himself out of his saddle as Hagan's gun licked its thin, blue-white smear against the moon-grayed night. He saw the dull sheen of the gunbarrel sweep in a short, vicious arc. The girl's slim body crumpled. A snarl broke from Coe as he sent his long frame lunging forward, big hands outstretched to grasp and kill.

Hagan fell back a step, eyes glaring, and his gun cut the air as he took quick aim. It roared its thudding report as Coe struck a flailing blow, and both men went crashing down together in a slashing, hammering tangle. The fury in Coe gave him the reckless savagery of a madman. His broad shoulders heaved as he pounded at the writhing, clawing shape under him.

A knee, driven up with hard force, made him gasp. A fist smashed into his mouth, sending his head back. Hagan's body twisted out from under him, floundered out of reach, and leaped up. Coe rolled over. He caught a flash of Hagan, standing crouched, dark face contorted.

The outlaw had dropped his gun. His left hand was thrust under his shirt, dragging out another. Somewhere, two bodies were crashing through brush. The shrill gabble of Tino mingled with the heavy rumble of Griff.

Coe rolled again, bounded to his

feet, and charged at Hagan as the gun tore free of the checked shirt. He struck at it, drove it against Hagan's chest, and sent the outlaw sprawling on his back. He took a long stride forward, and his boot hit something that clinked as it skidded against a stone. It was the dropped gun. He scooped it up, ducking as Hagan fired from the ground, and fumbled its hard butt into his palm.

A shot whanged from somewhere in the brush, then another. Coe dived aside, blazed twice at the spurts, and whirled as Hagan's lean shape scrambled up. He shot high, three times, fanning the hammer with his left hand, insensible to the torn gashes it ripped into the flesh of his palm.

Hagan went tottering back as though slapped by a giant hand, and his body hit the earth with solid impact. Somebody was coughing in the black darkness of the brush. It sounded like Tino. The cough ceased, became a sighing moan. Then silence. Hoofbeats drummed faintly, together with the slap of empty stirrups.

COE found himself shaking as his mad passion died. He glared about him. His roan had bolted. The light hue of the buckskin reared about in a circle, snorting, its looped rein caught around Stephanie. The high-strung animal was dragging the girl's body this way and that in a frantic effort to free itself.

Coe jumped to the buckskin, pulled down its up-flung head, and fought it to a trembling standstill. With the reins snagged tight under his arm, he bent over the girl. She was motionless, but breathing. With her dress torn and disheveled, she looked like a trampled flower. A thin trickle of blood ran down the side of her head, and her face was very pale.

Somewhere a coyote sent its throbbing howl at the moon. It sounded like a cry of death. Coe, muttering in a confused, broken stream and not knowing it, lifted the limp body. He did not look at the dim outline of Hagan's body, nor at the brush. He had forgotten Hagan, Tino, Griff. He knew only that the girl hung in his arms, very still, very quiet.

He mounted the buckskin, holding the girl close to him, her head lying on his shoulder, and dug heel.

LIGHTS streamed from the Fiddle-back ranch house, and Opie came hastening out to the porch as Coe pulled up in the yard.

"Whassa matter, Andy? Whassa matter? Where yuh been?" Opie goggled at the girl in Coe's arms. "Well, I swan! Peachy was drunk, too! Yep. Agin. I went down an' brung him in. Been babblin' 'bout her, an' 'bout you bein' a knot-headed idjit. We poured a gallon o' black coffee in him. He's kinda sobered up now, but still talkin' crazy."

Coe shouldered him aside and carried the girl into the house, Opie still talking and trotting along beside him. In the long living room he blared harsh commands at Pecheson-Lord, who lay stretched out on a couch.

"Get off! Get out o' my way! Get a doctor! Get—"

"Oh, I say!" Pecheson-Lord tumbled off the couch, clapped hands for his Chinaman, and reached instinctively for a bottle. "What happened, Coe? By Jove, she looks—"

"She's hurt," snapped Coe, gently laying the girl on the couch. "She's—she's hurt bad!" He choked, swore. "Ride down to Salina right away and get the doctor, Opie! She—she hasn't moved since I picked her up. She—may be dyin'! That damned Hagan—"

"That's what I say." Stephanie wriggled comfortably on the couch. "Twice I've been knocked silly. First you, and then Hagan. Now you're practically talking of burying me. What next?"

Coe gulped, looked down into the shimmering emerald eyes. They were fastened on his battered, bloody face. "I—you—you're alive!" he stammered.

"I'm afraid so," she agreed gravely. "I've been alive for the last fifteen minutes. You've got a hard shoulder, Andy. But comfortable, somehow. 'Lo, Peachy. Remember our bet? I had that in mind when I got this second clout."

"Uh—oh." Coe straightened up. "Your—your bet. Yeah. So that's why you—uh. I see."

"Yes, that's why." Stephanie sat up, arranging her ruined dress. "Well, Peach, do I pay now?"

"Oh, I say!" Pecheson-Lord looked aback, almost shocked. "My word, Steve, not right here and now, surely! I mean to say, it's—it's—"

"Why not?" murmured the girl. "Wait, Andy, don't go. Peach, I think you'd better tell him, eh?"

"Er—ah—very well." Pecheson-Lord gazed abstractedly at his drink. "You see, Coe, I plan to go back east. For good, I mean. Homesick, y'know. Don't belong here, anyway, what? So I plan a change here. Wanted to tell you before about it. Told Steve, and she asked me to wait a bit."

"I see." Coe stared down at the floor. Opie stood gaping at them. Two or three of the hands peeped in at the door. The Chinaman stood passively waiting for orders, one eye cocked on the nearly empty whisky bottle.

"I don't think you do." Pecheson-Lord took a turn up and down the room. "You see, I'd like to have this place run by a man who takes a personal satisfaction in doing a good job. So I'm signing a third interest in it over to you, Coe."

"Oh," said Coe. He felt no uplift. He glanced quickly at the couch and away again. "So you an' Steve—?"

"He still doesn't understand," interrupted Stephanie.

She rose, swayed a little, and walked a trifle giddily over to Coe. Reaching up, she pulled his head down close to her level. "Listen, Andy," she said, very carefully, as though to a befuddled child. "We made a bet, Peach and I, see? I lost, see? The bet was that I—I—I'm to ask you to—to marry me! S-see?"

Coe blinked, swallowed. He made a lot of strange noises in his throat, ending up with: "Lord!"

"Eh?" murmured Pecheson-Lord politely.

"Er—not you," mumbled Coe. "I was—heck, get the hell out o' here, will you? How can I propose when you're around."

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Ol' Boosty Peckleberry's pal, Dr. Fewgins, was one smart scientific hombre. He could unearth the skeletons of practically anything—but he was plum' boogered when it came to digging up

BOOSTY'S BONES

By S. OMAR BARKER

THERE was company in the Curly Q bunkhouse—a young archeologist and paleontologist named Dr. Fewgins, brought over for supper by Banty Maginnis from his "diggin's" at the Sandia Cave.

"So far," Dr. Fewgins was saying, "we've discovered bones of the phytosaur, the dinosaur, the brontosaur, the—"

"Milk is sour," broke in Biff Wilkins.

"So is your manners!" grunted Mr. Embustero (Boosty) Peckleberry. "You got to ixcuse him, Perfessor. His tongue's on a swivet an' wobbles at both ends."

"Certainly," said Dr. Fewgins. "Then in the strata of the Pleistocene age, we have discovered relics of the gravigrade edentates, both Nothrotherium and Megalonyx, the Arctodus or short-faced cave bear, the—"

"Say," exclaimed Bran Mash Mullins, "kinder keep a lookout for my rawhide rope, will yuh? I dabbed it on an ol' short-faced bruin over that way, come four year ago in June, an' he got away with it. You'll recognize it by the Heiser saddle on the other end, an' the bones of that little ol' knot-head sorrel I was ridin'. If you find it—"

"If he does," offered Boosty Peckleberry sagely, wringing a cup of drip coffee out of his hosstails, "it'll

I drawed both my hosstails acrost ol' Drummy's hump and tied 'em, cinchin' me on solid . . .

likely be kinder molty, layin' in there with all them sour bones. Pass the Perfessor the biskits, Lufe."

"Ketch!" said the new hand named Lufe. "My uncle down in Texas yoosta have a dog-faced short, I mean a short-faced dog, an'—"

"An' a short-witted nephew," put in Biff Wilkins. "You found any remains of the side-hill piffletoot yet, Perfessor, with short legs on the upper side so he kin travel the hillside without leanin'?"

"The—er—piffletoot, I fear," said Dr. Fewgins, "is a mythical figment of fevered fantasy foreign to the field of paleontology. But if you find this scientific discourse tiresome—"

"Tiresome hell!" cut in Bran Mash. "What we want to know is what these here critters look like, so in case we meet up with one, we'll know what we're runnin' from. A man'd hate to skeedaddle from one of them there Arctodidious short-faced bears only to find out later it wasn't nothin' but a little ol' gravy-grade eaten-tater!"

"Calm your fears, Mr. Mullins," said Dr. Fewgins. "All of these mammals are extinct. There are none alive today."

"That's all right for the mammals," protested Biff Wilkins, "but what about the pappals?"

"As I was saying," continued Dr. Fewgins, ignoring him, "among the bones of mammals of the ice age that ceased to exist some 10,000 to 15,000 years ago, we have unearthed those of the Smilodon or saber-toothed tiger, the Elephas and Mammonteus or prehistoric elephants, one specimen of the Camelops, or camel, the—"

"Ixcuse me, Perfessor," interrupted Boosty with sudden new interest, "did you say camel?"

"Certainly. Why not?"

"Oh, I ain't questionin' it!" protested old Boosty, shoving back from the table and settling in the rawhide rocker of reminiscence. "But you better look at the date on them camel bones agin, Perfessor, because, lemme see, that was the year my whiskers first got long enough that ol' Sam Houston begun pesterin' me to borry 'em to measure Texas with. Somewheres around forty, fifty, maybe sixty year ago. I recollect it so exactly on account of an ol' hawg-faced hootlum called Pecos Bill. I'd jest made up my mind to take my whiskers over an' measure out Texas for ol' Sam after all, when this Pecos Bill beat me to it. He persuaded ol' Sam to use his herd of snakes instid. Y'see when this—"

"I thought we was augurin' about camels," complained Bran Mash. "What snakes got to do with this here argument?"

Y'see, Perfessor (Boosty continued), what iggerunce us scientists is up aginst? The facks of science has got to be led up to gradual, like learnin' a tenderfoot to lay still when it's a skunk in camp. Nobody but the most iggerunt people gits too hasty about it.

As I was sayin', ol' Sam Houston hired Pecos Bill's snakes to measure out Texas with. He reelized big ol' rattlers would be mighty noisy, so he taken little bitty ol' snakes avvidgin' a quarter of a mile long, an' he figgered out how many thousand quarters it would take to reach around Texas, an' they went to work layin' it out. Yessir, that's the reason Texas turn out so big—them snakes was garter snakes, an' ol' Sam stretched 'em.

That's how come it to be so far acrost Texas that a smooth faced boy enterin' it on the east an' crossin' it by mule, hoss or stage-coach would be a dodderin' ol' Rip Van Wrinkle, time he got into New Mexico. Got to where one of us natcheral New Mexicans couldn't step out to gather a bucket of buffler chips without havin' to stop an' help fifteen or twenty of these here agin' immigrants unbutton their pants.

NATCHERLY, the burnin' problim was to figger out some quicker way acrost Texas. So ol' Andy Jackson appointed me an' Kit Carson a committee to see if we couldn't solve it. We had to do somethin' mighty quick, too, because this here snaky Pecos Bill was already learnin' a bunch of about six thousand jackrabbits to skate, so as quick as he got his track of greased ice laid across the Lone Star State, he could set up a line of stagecoaches drawed by eighty-hoss teams of skatin' jacks an' plumb corner the háulin' business.

Where was he goin' to git the ice? Shucks an' shirttail, that wasn't no problim. All he had to do was plant two rows of popcorn an' run a ditch of water between 'em. Quick as that popcorn got ripe an' the Texas sun hit it, it'd let in to pop, which the water in the ditch would promptly mistake it for snow an' freeze up, makin' as nice a track of greased ice as ever busted a bustle. The grease? Why, it was *buttered* popcorn he was plantin', o' course!

But supposin' it come a cool spell so the corn wouldn't pop, an' there wouldn't be no ice, an' all them stage coaches would be stranded? Or supposin' the ice happened to freeze with the slick side down—because, as ever Tehanner will freely admit, a heap of strange things takes place in Texas?

Or supposin' the corn wasn't ripe enough to pop yet when it come one of them sulky Texas days that's so hot the poultry farmers has got to foller their hens around with a fan to keep 'em from layin' fried eggs? Such a day would git the water to boilin' in the ditch, an' boilin' water is mighty hard to freeze.

Nossir, it was up to me an' Kit to figger out some means of fast transportmatation acrost Texas that wouldn't depend in no way on weather nor water. Now the pronghorn antelope is right fast on his feet—the only animal we knowed of that could outrun his own shadder—so we figgered to round us up a few hundred, break 'em to harness an' try 'em out for relay teams.

To ketch antelope, all you got to do is locate 'em, lay down behind a bush an' wave a hankerchiff an' the first thing you know an' ol, buck pronghorn will amble up to wipe his nose on it. 'Course you've done sprinkled pepper on the hankerchiff, an' when he sneezes, you grab him. It's as simple as curlin' a pig's tail.

So me an' Kit was layin' behind a bush over on the Cimarron, offerin' antelopes a free nose wipe on a red peppered bandanner, when I felt somethin' kinder nosin' at mine, an' all of a sudden ol' Kit says, "Wagh! Don't look now, Boosty, but do you see what I see?"

"Question is," I says, "do you see what I smell?"

"What color?" whispers Kit.

"Kinder of a bull-gravy yaller," I says. "Or maybe a cow-chip brown, with a sag-pants nose, a sway-backed neck, an' a sack o' wheat on its back!"

"That ain't no sack of wheat," says Kit. "That's a hump!"

"Don't be an idjit," I argues. "Bufflers has got humps, not antelopes."

"This 'un has," says Kit. "But it sets too tailwards fer a buffler."

"Maybe he was climbin' a steep hill an' it slipped on him," I offers.

"Seems to be hurtin' him anyways," agrees Kit, "the way he's moanin'. Wagh! Looks like he's aimin' to pray, Boosty!"

Shore 'nough, this big ol' hump-backed, muley, dingy yaller antelope is foldin' them ten foot legs of his, kneelin'. I allus was mighty quick to savvy the dumb animals, an' it's plumb plain to me what's ailin' this 'un.

" 'Course he's prayin', Kit," I says. "Prayin' for us to help him work that hump back up over his shoulders where it belongs. Wait till I git our mules. We'll snap our loops around that there hump an' yank it forwards

for him quicker'n a skeered cowboy can swaller his cud."

But in figgerin' on mule-power to help us, I'd kinder counted my chickens before the ol' hen set. For no sooner did them two ol' *paisano* jassacks ketch a whiff of this kneelin' novelty of the animal kingdom than they throwed up their ears an' lit out for Kansas City. Quick as I come down, me an' Kit laid to an' done what we could to shift that misplaced hump ourownselves. We managed to wobble it some, but as far as ackshurly movin' it was consarned, we'd jest as well been tryin' to pull a stump with a buttonhook.

"Seem like it's kinder growed there, Kit," I says.

"Wagh!" says Kit. "It's a wart, that's what it is!"

"I never seen a wart the size of that before," I observes.

"You ain't never seen an antelope the size o' this 'un either," says Kit. "Nor the shape!"

"But it come right up to wipe its nose," I augurs. "If it ain't a antelope, what the hell-for-twice is it?"

"Name it," says Kit, "an' you kin have it!"

"I'll name it," I says, "an' you kin have it!"

But seem like neither one of us could git out of part ownership in the critter, because upon further investimagation, I found a brand on him. It was jest a plain "US."

"Whatever he is an' wherever he come frum, Kit," I says, "that US stands for 'us', so I reckon he's ourn. Wup! This here looks like cinch marks! You reckon he's broke to ride?"

"We're afoot anyhow," says Kit. "Git on him an' see."

"Whoa, Drummy!" I says, an' clumb aboard.

HOW come me to call him Drummy, it was because everwhen we'd whammed his wart with our fists, tryin' to jar it loose so we could shift it frontwards where it belonged, it give out kinder of a holler sound, like a drum half full of mush.

Quick as I clumb aboard, he let in to heave an' finally hove hisself to his feet.

"How's he ride?" hollers ol' Kit, cuppin' his hands an' bellerin' like a bull on the wrong side of the fence so I could hear him way up where I was.

"Well," I squawls back at him, "if this hump was jest sawed off a little flatter, a feller might build a doghouse up here an' crawl into that. Otherwise if I hadn't been settin' on a gummy log kinder recent, I kinder doubt if I'd stick!"

"Let's see how he travels," bellers Kit. "I'll hold onto his tail for a piece, an' if he's easy gaited up there on top, we'll see if he'll carry double."

Well, I was jest shiftin' my cud to holler "giddap," when ol' Kit grabbed his tail. Gents an' gentile jugheads, I'm claimin' we went from there! I don't mean this critter scrooched his belly down to the ground an' *run,* like a hoss does for a spurt of speed. Neither did he try to jump loose from his tail like a jackrabbit makin' mileage, nor waste his energies in them long, stiff-legged bounces that makes a windcutter out of the antelope.

Nearest I can describe his gait, I yoosta know an ol' *cocinero* name o' Sidlin' Sam with number twelve feet an' one hip knocked down, which nevertheless was a fool fer fandangoin' with the gals. Well, this humpbacked critter's gait was about like ol' Sidlin' Sam in a prize-winnin' waltz with Bunion Betsy from the nester settlement over on Cross-Eyed Crick. Kinder of a shufflin' pace, it was, coverin' a leap o' ground, but rougher'n a rockin' hoss on a rockpile to ride.

So rough, in facks, that I'd of jostled right off if it hadn't been for

my hosstails. Quick as I seen I'd never stay on him by tooth an' toenail, I tied my six-shooter onto the end of my right mustache for a weight, reached out an' flang it plumb under his belly so hard it flipped up to where I could grab it on the other side. Then I done ditto with my left mustache, drawed both of 'em tight acrost ol' Drummy's hump an' tied 'em, cinchin' me on there as solid as a gadfly on a stump-tailed bull.

Then's when I begun hearin' the noise. It sounded like somebody blowin' a bull bass horn with a tin whistle in the mouthpiece, an' it was comin' regular an' steady: *"Awngg-fwee-ee—awn-ggrrg-fwee—ee."* Like that. No, it wasn't the critter. It was ol' Kit. First I figgered it must be his gullet suckin' wind on account of the speed. But it wasn't. Nossir, without slowin' ol' Drummy up, I squinched around for a look, an' dawg me for a short-tailed cat, if it wasn't ol' Kit *snorin'!* Why, he'd kep' his holt on Drummy's tail, an' the speed we was travellin' jest natcherly lifted him up in the air, straight out behind, like you've see the wind lift the tail of a runnin' mustang, an' there he lay, sound asleep!

YOU can see what a quandamary that put me in. There I was, rapidly joltin' to death, an' I dassent holler whoa, because if I stopped ol' Drummy before Kit woke up, he'd fall outa that air bed smack at this strange critter's heels, an' if ol' Drummy could kick like he could travel, one *patada* would slam Mister Carson plumb back into his boyhood.

But I jest had to stop, not only on account of gittin' jolted to death, but because ol' Drummy was headin' straight for ol' Pecos Bill's Hornit Ranch on Bitter Honey Crick, an' o' course Pecos would sic his hornits on us, an' if he did, ol' Drummy would start battin' his tail at 'em an' probly beat ol' Kit plumb to death.

It was one of them times when a feller's got to do somethin' besides beller an' bat his eyes. So, diggin' in my spurs till I had ol' Drummy speeded up so fast the wind shucked ol' Kit's boots right off, I uncinched my whiskers, an' all of a sudden I hollered "Whoa!"

Yessir, it worked. Ol' Drummy's front end jerked to a stop, but he was goin' so fast that I had time to jump down, run around behind an' wake up ol' Kit before his hind end (Drummy's, not ol' Kit's) slowed up enough to let down his tail.

"Wagh!" yawns ol' Kit, easin' down his feet. "That there's the smoothest mule ride I ever taken! Where's my boots?"

"Gone with the wind," I says. "I'll swap you mine for your interest in ol' Drummy."

So that's how come me to git full ownership of the one an' only Peckleberry Quick-Way Cabin Cruiser De Loox Transportmatation Over-Night Acrost Texas Company.

'Course the cabin on my ship of the desert didn't carry no indoors plumbin', but it had a nice back porch that —what say? What am I talkin' about?

Ain't you whistle-brains never read no hist'ry? Well, quick as I seen ol' Drummy could travel, I knowed I had the secrit of how to git folks acrost Texas faster'n a sheriff could whip a bang-tailed hoss. My plan was to saw off that hump flat an' level, nail a set of bedsprings onto it, on top of which I aimed to build me some benches with umbrellers to keep out the Texas sun, an' I'd be ready for passengers. But ol' Drummy must of heard me thinkin' about sawin' off his hump, for that very first night he taken action to prevent it.

Kit claimed he smelt a camp of mountain men somewheres around, an' reckoned he'd head out for it, but I told him I'd be gittin' on home to hunt up a saw. So I borried hobbles outa my hosstails an' sidelined ol'

Drummy so he couldn't travel so fast, clumb up an' struck out agin.

Come evenin', I spied a nester's shanty, set up on stilts to keep out the rattlesnakes, so I put in there to spend the night. As we hove closer, a considerable exodus was observed lightin' a shuck over the hill, consistin' of the nester an' his family, includin' a mule, two slat-sided cows, a hawg an' eight chickens that hadn't never seen a humped jassack before an' didn't never want to agin.

There was a fine rabbit-track stew in the kettle, which would be plumb spiled before they got back, rate they was stampedin' when last saw toppin' the hill, so I jest he'ped myself. Western horsepitality is a wonderful custom, Perfessor. It gives you leave to stay all night anywheres you take the notion, pervided there ain't nobody around to run you off.

There was kinder of a trap door in the middle of this shanty's floor, probly so the ol' man could spit prune seeds at the rattlesnakes without havin' to step outdoors. Must of been about first coyote-howlin' time after midnight when I come sudden awake. Seem like there was a heap of rattlesnake buzzin' under the floor, an' somebody shore was rockin' the boat. I stricken a match to look at that nester's whiskey jug to see if maybe I'd drunk more of it than I'd aimed to, but I hadn't.

Nossir, believe it or rub out the taw line, gents, that hole in the floor was gone! In its place was ol' Drummy's hump. Seem like he'd tried to crawl up through the trapdoor to be with me, an' stucken on his hump. So there he was, his ol' swaybacked neck protuberatin' out the winder, an' the whole house teeterin' on his back!

QUICK as I reelized the situmawation, I grabbed a blankit off'n the bed, throwed it over that hump fer a tablecloth an' set down to breakfast. Ten minutes later we was headin' for Arkinsaw to pick up our first load of passengers on the Peckleberry Cabin Cruiser de Loox. Yessir, without even so much as whettin' my pocket knife, here I had me a complete cabin built on top of ol' Drummy, with room for anywheres from thirteen to fourteen passengers with a lovely back porch.

Rode easy, too. All them rattlesnakes under the floor, they'd got so mad dullin' their teeth on ol' Drummy's hide without puncturin' it, that they'd got entangled in the shaggy wool on his sides, an' in their wroth they'd kept coilin' up to strike, to where the floor of the cabin on all sides of the hump was restin' on coiled rattlesnakes. I couldn't have figgered out a better system of springs for easy ridin' if I'd studied over it for a month of Tuesday evenins.

At first I had some trouble guidin' this here ship of the desert, but finally I found a dustpan under the stove, seen it had a holler handle, an' wedged it onto Drummy's tail for a rudder. Then all I had to do was run up a pair of gear lines, an' set there on the back porch, enjoyin' the scenery an' guidin' ol' Drummy jest by the turn of my head. Y'see them gear lines wasn't nothin' but my upper-lip hosstails. Everwhen I turned my head to the right it yanked the rudder north'ards, thereby steerin' the ship to the left, or south'ards, an' vice reversey, or belayin' the helm, as us sailors say.

Well, 'long about noon, our bearin's showin' us to be halfway acrost Texas, a pigeon come flutterin' in the winder, an' lit on my shoulder. First off I figgered it was the dove ol' Noah had sent out from Mount Arrowroot, which had kinder lost its way an' mistook this for the Ark. But it wasn't. It was one of them mail carrier pigeons with a messidge frum ol' Andy Jackson.

"Hold ever'thing, Boosty," it read. "No need you sweatin' your cranial

punkin any more about a quick way to git acrost Texas, because the Guvmint has done hired ol' Hi Jolly to do it with a bunch of camels."

"Pidge," I tells this bird, "if you ain't jest an ol' milk-stool pigeon sent out by Pecos Bill to flumgumerate me with a false alarm, you kin flap right back to Ol' Andy an' tell him I said whatever the hell he means by 'camels,' they cain't compare with this humped jassack I've done got rigged up for the Crost Texas Traffick, an' if he thinks he kin side-track ol' Boosty Peckleberry with a little ol' billy-doo brung by a bird, he's foolin' hisself as bad as the feller that throwed rocks at the moon. I may not be the digit that drowned the duck, but by the skintillatin' skunk skins I'm the scout an' skipper of this here schooner, an' we're scootin' for Arkinsaw! Or in other words scat, before I pernounce you pigeon pie!"

Maybe I didn't have no business sassin' the President thataway, but he was a long ways off, an' it shore riled my dandruff to git a messidge like that right on the thrasholds of success, you might say.

But that wasn't the worst of it. That pigeon fluttered out an' lit on my rudder an' I had to throw my last chunk of chawin' at him to shoo him off. So I belayed the helm an' steered for the town of Sore Lip, Texas, to buy me a new supply.

Gents, I'm tellin' you the facks. Five miles outa Sore Lip was a six mule team stuck in the quicksand with a wagon load of buffler hides. They spied us comin', or maybe caught a whiff of that pecooliar perfume of ol' Drummy's, an' spooked. Yessir, not only skeered so terrible that they yanked the stuck hoodlum outa the bog in six directions, but even them buffler hides bounced bellerin' off the waggin an' taken out in wild stampede.

Three miles frum town we run head on into a herd of longhorns them runaway buffler hides had stampeded back my way, an' the sight of a sway-necked jassack with a house on his back turned 'em so sudden I seen a hundred or more with their tails hangin' out their mouths as they run.

THE hosses of the cowboys r'ared back so astonished when they spied us that eighteen men died of sunburn on the soles of their feet. Yessir, left their boots right in the stirrups, landed on their heads in the sand so hard that their socks slid plumb up past their knees, an' the sun natcherly burnt their feet to cracklin's before they could dig theirselves out.

As for the town of Sore Lip, time we arrove, it was plumb deserted. You'll know how almighty spooked them Tehanners was when I tell you they'd even left the bars lined with full whiskey glasses.

In facks, them full whiskey glasses come purt near to ruinin' me. I didn't dast leave 'em thataway for fears an earthquake or somethin' would spill 'em before them spooked Tehanners got back, an' waste all that whiskey. So I had to drink it to save it. An' endurin' that delay, ol' Pecos Bill caught up with me.

Yessir, I was jest downin' the ninety-ninth glass, an' debatin' whether to pour one myownself an' make it an even hundred, when I heard corn a-poppin' off north of town, an' shore 'nough, it was Pecos's popcorn, freezin' him that track of greased ice, an' I hadn't no more'n histed anchor an' swung onto the poop deck of my sway-necked ship when yonder come ol' Pecos, jerklinin' a team of eighty-two skatin' rabbits, skeedaddlin' for Arkinsaw.

Gents, that there was a race, but Pecos had his stagecoach loaded with coyotes, howlin' to skeer them rabbits, an' make 'em skate faster. In facks he was outrunnin' me by about twenty mile when the Arkinsaw line come in

sight. Pore ol' Drummy was sweatin' to where he was leavin' a trail of white where the sun dried the drippin's to salt. But it was his puspeeration that saved the day. For a west wind sprung up, blowed a spray of that salty sweat out ahead onto Pecos Bill's ice—an' you know how a little salt'll roughen up ice!

Yessir, Pecos had made the mistake of not learnin' them jacks to skate on rough ice, an' we hove into Arkinsaw ahead of him, loaded up the passengers an' was all set to start back when a feller with a Turkish towel around his head come runnin' up the gangplank.

"Hi, toots!" he says. "Me Hi Jolly!"

"Well," I snaps. "I'm kinder high myownself, but I ain't jolly! What you want?"

"Me Hi Jolly!" he jabbers. "Me camel driver for Guvmint. Me lose camel. Sahib Pecos Bill, him say Bloosty steal 'um! Now me ketchum!"

"How an' the hezzykiyi would I steal a camel," I says, "when I ain't never even see one?"

But dawg me for a burnt-tailed wolf, if he don't maintain that ol' Drummy *is* a camel! One of the Guvmint's camels that has went astray! To prove it he says somethin' that sounds like "allah-dallah-fallah-me," an' skin me fer a skunk, if ol' Drummy don't nod his head an' answer him.

But anybody with sech a headache that he's got to wear a towel on it, wasn't goin' to ally-dally me out of my Cabin Cruiser de Loox, even if it was a camel.

"Listen," I says, "if you kin talk camel so good, supposin' you tell ol' Drummy to belay the helm an' git fer New Mexico!"

"Sowbelly!" he hollers, or what sounds like it, an' salt me for pork, if Drummy don't come about an' head west!

I figgered I'd made good time comin' east, but this here Hi Jolly knowed more about camel drivin' than a duck does about quack. With him fer pilot we cut acrost Texas so fast we couldn't see our own dust.

GENTS, that was the beginnin' of a glorious career for the Peckleberry Quick-Way Cabin Cruiser De Loox Acrost Texas and All Points West Company—an' also the finish. 'Course you'll no doubt recollect, Perfessor, how ol' Andy Jackson vicey-versied his former plans an' decreed aginst any further use of camels on account they was spookin' everything but the cuckleburrs all to hell. But that wasn't what stopped the P. Q. W.C.C.D.L.A.T. and All Points West Company. Nossir, it was that underslung, double-crossin' Pecos Bill. Probly anticipatin' his defeat in the race acrost Texas, ol' Pecos had dropped his trained, ice-gnawin' beavers ever' few miles along the ditch as he come by, an' they dammed it up to where it overflew its banks, an' flooded all them west Texas plains two, three feet deep in ice.

Natcherly when we hit that, the speed o' Drummy was travellin', he begun to skid. I let in to belay the rudder, an' the passengers all got in front of the hump an' pushed back what they could, but if you ever tried to slow up a skiyootin' ship of the desert on a sheet of ice, Perfessor, you know we never had no chance.

Well ol' Drummydary come skiddin' off the caprock so fast he jounced right over the Pecos, skidded acrost the Estancia Valley an' whammed head on into them Sandia Mountains before we could stop him.

All the passengers but me an' Hi Jolly had done jumped overboard before we hit. Hi Jolly had clumb out onto the rudder to try an' belay it some. But to Noah Vale, as the Scrip Sure says. You know how most any animule will fling up his tail an' squawl when he sees a mountain rushin' at him? That's what pore ol'

Drummy done, an' flang Hi Jolly so high he come down in Arizona. If I recollect my cosmography correct, them Arizonians has set up a monument marking where he lit, somewheres out between Phoenix an' Los Angyloose.

Yessir, Perfessor an' gents, believe it or swaller the juice, that pore ol' drummydary hit the side of them Sandia Mountains so dadgoozled hard he plowed right into the bowels of 'em, an' was never saw agin. You findin' camel bones in them Sandia diggin's, specially if they's signs of the Ice Age around 'em like you say, Perfessor—they're natcherly bound to be ol' Drummy's—an' there hain't a doubt!"

"Ah!" smiled Professor Fewgins. "A most interesting theory, Mr. Peckleberry! But what, may I inquire, became of you? Did you stay with the ship?"

"That," said old Boosty solemnly, "is jest what I'm tryin' to find out. It's worried me a heap, an' I'm countin' on you pantalette-ologists or whatyoumacallums, to settle it. While you're lookin' out fer Bran Mash's rope in there, I wisht you'd kinder keep your eye skun for my bones, Perfessor. I'd kinder like to have 'em fer a souvenir!"

STEEL RAILS

Buffalo Hunters and Badmen

CHAPTER I

A HELLBOUND VARMINT

THREADING an artery of steel across Nebraska, heading west, the railroad camp of the U. T. & E. dumped men and raw material on the plains not a half mile from a stockade-girt trading post and sent its Indian visitors riding for the hills. The smoke of construction train and boarding train, the latter switching to a siding while the former unloaded rails with a clangor like hell's hammers, had barely darkened the peaceful Platte Valley with its banners of rapacious civilization before squaws of Lame Wolf's band of Ogallala Sioux were striking the hide lodges.

For a week the Indians had camped in the post's vicinity exchanging their buffalo robes for the cheapest and least in trade goods that the white trader could unload on them. But with the coming of the Iron Horse, they departed in sullen dignity. Ironically enough, at the moment that travois tracks were being worn in the soft soil north of the Platte, another village, of canvas and warped clapboards, not buffalo hides, was rising hastily beside the steel rails. They were the white men's temples — saloons, gambling-hells, dance halls—housing more potential savagery of a baser sort than all the lodges of the Sioux and Pawnees on the Niobrara, the Loup, the Platte and the Republican.

By mid-afternoon two hundred horses—most of them wearing the "U. S." brand of the Second Cavalry —were removed from box cars and strung on picket-line until corrals and tents of the military escort

WESTWARD

By J. Edward Leithead

In a Rousing Complete Novel

The death knell of red war tolled out its grim message of destruction when the buckskin empire builders laid their steel rails westward. And even though that young ramrod, Lanny Shadler, was of the die-hard breed, neither his Colts nor his rifle could match the trail trickery of a redskin horde lashed on by renegade greed.

could be erected. Out of the confusion of "throwing-down" trotted a rider who was neither "pony soldier" nor road hand, but indispensable to one as scout and to the other as meat getter. He was young, with bold aquiline features, burned to a rich mahogany. His blue-gray eyes and salient jaw-line bespoke the fighting man, and his tawny mane touched the wide shoulders, like that of other long-haired plainsmen of the period.

He was hunter-clad in fringed buckskin, a flat-crowned, broad-

brimmed plains hat, his footgear the hallmark of the riding man from the Southwest. When Langdon Shadler chucked the "Rio hat" and apron chaps of his native Texas, he disdained to swap his trim cowboy boots and huge-roweled spurs for moccasins. They were a part of him, as were the Colt .44's swinging from crossed belts.

As a cowboy he had never had use for the Sharps .50 buffalo gun now balanced across his thighs and kept in position by pressure against his saddle horn. But more than twelve hundred workmen must be fed, and that twenty-pound rifle, firing a long bullet, provided the meat that held the road on its westward march. Dan Heeley, contractor for boarding the employees, paid well by weight for buffalo haunches, yet profited richly, since the buffalo were to be had for the killing.

Back along the valley of the Platte the rotting carcasses laid low by Lanny Shadler's skill attracted four-footed prowlers of the plains, and Heeley hired Lanny for the necessary slaughter. A war-bonnet on the ground, well out from right of way, still fluttering its feathers defiantly in the hot wind, a broken lance or war arrows sticking in clay and sand, perhaps a rustling saber, a bullet-holed canteen and cartridge belt with the lettering "U. S. A." on brass buckle, all attested to other slaughter and the striving of redman against white to hold that land for the redman.

Spying afar on the grassy ridges the rear guard of Lame Wolf's braves, looking back like baffled eagles while the camp moved upward to new quarters, Lanny Shadler spoke to his horse:

"That ain't the last we'll see of 'em, fellow. Their fight's a losin' one and they know it—but they're dead game! And who can blame a man fightin' with all that's in him for his land and home? Not me!"

IN common with many other frontier dwellers, the red horsemen of the plains more or less compelled Shadler's sympathy. He was sure that, in their place, he would have struggled as they did with lethal arrow, lance and trade gun to stem that smothering horde. For their alien ways spelled crowding of the tribes from the freedom of plains and mountain to barren lands, out of existence or virtually so.

But aggressive, indomitable, independent, even Shadler could not pause because the Indian's inevitable defeat had its tragic side. He believed

in survival of the fittest, else he never would have left Texas and profitless cattle herding with the vision of a railroad spanning the continent and opening up a market to the beef-eating East. With no outlet for the herds so vastly increased while her men were enlisted under the Stars and Bars, Texas was poor while surrounded by potential wealth in meat and hides.

As Lanny conceived it the future of West and Southwest lay in the cattle industry, extended by transportation facilities. He had ridden north purposefully to do his share toward advancing the rails in a capacity befitting him, that of buffalo hunter. Once a means of marketing beef was established, he was sure, the longhorns would "come up the trail" in

a flood and money would flow back into Texas. Of course, other farsighted men held the same opinion. But they were not at Lanny's side, shooting buffalo, fighting Indians and observing daily the growth of gleaming double tracks toward the goal of their dreams.

Through the wide-standing stockade gates pattered Lanny and dropped bridle reins before the door of the main building. Not an Indian was about. Indeed, the post appeared deserted until he marched with chinking step into the big trade room, its atmosphere compounded of many smells.

Behind the pine plank counter which extended two-thirds the length of the room, flanked on the one hand by a stock of robes not yet stored away, and on the other by upended whisky keg, stood a man slightly above Lanny's six-foot height. His bull neck columned from unlaced, beaded tunic, his face apparently carved from a chunk of red rimrock. He, too, had blue-gray fighter's eyes, but his long curly hair was dark, the massive head singularly resembling that of a bull buffalo.

Halfway to the counter, Shadler's gaze struck the trader's and it was like a physical impact.

"As I live and breathe—" Lanny's face darkened with singing blood—"if it ain't Stack Kilgore!"

"In the flesh, and surprised to see you so far off your range," said the trader, glowering. "How's tricks in Texas?"

The meat getter completed his stride to the counter, eyes close-lidded. "They're still waitin' for you with a hangnoose on the old stampin' ground—you and your cow-stealin' brothers. Where's Jed and Mort? Runnin' this shebang with you? I pity the Indians! You never done an honest act in your life, Stack, and folks at Logtown still figure you must've ended that girl, Annabelle Yancey, in the brush somewhere, for she never turned up again!"

Kilgore shifted his cut of "Navy" plug to his other cheek and his gaze burned. "The Comanches got her. It was you throwed suspicion of murder on me, Shadler, and I still owe you for it. Jed and Mort didn't live long after we quit Texas—only a year. They're buried on the Weepin' Water, west of here, where we tried ranchin' again and failed. Troublesome neighbors, like we had in Texas."

"Because you were rustlin', like you all did in Texas!" Lanny banged emphasis with blocked fist on the counter. "Jed and Mort were hung—don't tell me they wasn't! And you moved on here to cheat the Indians. Might be the reddies will have better luck puttin' you under the grass roots, when they find you out, than white men you've robbed!"

Stack Kilgore's fingers gripped the counter edge. His only weapon at the moment was a foot-long butcher knife in sheath attached to beaded belt. But, even had he been Colt-hung, experience had taught him he was no match for the plainsman at crossing guns.

"You come here to fight or buy somethin'?" he demanded suddenly.

Lanny thumped the long-barreled Sharps across his bent arm. "Got any fifty caliber shells for this death-spreader?"

Fighting his wrath, Kilgore wheeled toward his crowded shelves, feeling entirely safe in presenting his broad back. It had never been said that Lanny Shadler killed a man otherwise than by facing him out to the last thumbed shot.

WITH a sneer Kilgore deposited several boxes of the heavy shells on the counter. "So you quit cows to work for the railroad? Thirty miles west of here the buffalo peter out. What'll you do for meat then?" But he knew the answer, as certain as it snapped from Shadler's lips:

"Cattle, of course. From the dis-

trict you was chased out of last, the Weepin' Water. Enough Texas cowmen have settled there in the past two-three years, waitin' for this same railroad, to supply all we need. I aim to make a contract with 'em."

Lowered lids hid the sudden shine of avarice in Stack's eyes. But Lanny, counting silver dollars from his elkhide poke, wouldn't have noticed. When the U. T. & E. surveyors had gone through, long before, Kilgore had known the laying of the rails was an assured thing, and that eventually the road must depend on cattle for subsistence. But trade at the post was fairly brisk and he had not given serious thought to the possibilities of profiting by the need for beef—until Lanny's words had thrust the chance at him in concrete form.

He was acquainted with that cow country better than Shadler, and instantly realized the enormous profit to be gained from selling cattle to the railroad if he got them for nothing. Details of procedure were lacking at the moment, but in his scheming brain one thought predominated. Lanny Shadler must step out of the scene forever, else he would secure that contract. Kilgore's hatred of his fellow Texan scarcely needed extra prodding to make him act. Murder lust had run riot in his veins since the moment Lanny stalked into the trade room. But how to meet him on equal footing, without guns, and certainty of victory?

Stack had it, as his hand brushed the beaded knife sheath! He was gathering up Lanny's silver dollars, whipping his animosity to explosive pitch, when Lanny glared at him smoky-eyed and said:

"Now I've finished the railroad's business I can attend to my own. Stack, you ain't fit to live. I've plugged many a Sioux brave whose hide was worth ten of yours. Stealin' cattle's bad enough, but the face of Annabelle Yancey comes between us every time I look at you! You dirty dog—"

"I'll kill you for that, Shadler!" Kilgore's voice was not very loud, but deadly.

"Sure—" Lanny's chin jutted, his lips thinned grimly—"or I'll kill you! It's in the lap of the gods!"

The tension as they faced each other, with Kilgore's white-faced clerk peering from behind a bale of goods, was slightly lessened by the staccato of shod hoofs, the rattle of wheels, punctuated by stout-lunged yells. But they were the vociferations of exuberant white men, not Indians, and presently from saddle and wagon trooped in off-duty soldiers and laborers from the nearby camp.

"Hi, Lanny! Mixin' the war medicine?" boomed a grizzled sergeant in dusty blue, faded yellow chevrons on his sleeves and a stripe down each trouser leg. He had been quick to catch the bristling expression of plainsman and trader. "Crawl his hump, lad, if he insulted ye! There's enough of us to see fair play."

"But let's sample the trade booze first, sarge," howled a thirteen-dollar-a-month private, cocking forage cap over one bloodshot eye. "We came over to see if this mountain dew has a stronger kick than the forty-rod at camp. Trot out your tin cups, trader!"

Stack Kilgore relaxed momentarily to beckon his clerk.

"Serve 'em, Barney! Shadler and me have more important business." He spread palms flat on the counter, leaning toward Lanny. "What d'you say to knives in the storeroom yon, with the door shut? Then your swaddy friends can't side you."

Though, as the challenged party, Shadler had choice of weapons, his reply came instantly.

"Popper or chopper, it suits me alike. And the boys ain't in on it. Hold 'em this side the door, sergeant, till I come back and join you in drinkin' to a hellbound dead varmint!"

Clamorous over the idea of the

novel battle, not understanding its cause, soldiers and road hands crowded around Lanny as he laid buffalo gun on the counter and stripped the gun belts from his waist.

"I'll borrow one of your stickers." He nodded to the trader, and Kilgore reached down from a shelf a sun-glinting blade of length equal to his own.

Lanny jerked off his cowboy boots and in sock feet followed the scuffing sound of the trader's moccasins toward the rear room. The door closed, and the voices of waiting troopers and laborers sank to a murmur. Forgotten were the empty tin cups in their hands.

CHAPTER II

Redman and White

DAN HEELEY, ruddy-faced and picturesquely profane boarding contractor, had a word to say to his buffalo hunter regarding the supply of meat on hand. Unable to find him in camp, someone told Heeley that he had been seen riding toward that post upriver, and the rawboned Irishman saddled a horse. He could as well have waited for Shadler's return, but possibly the trader had information to impart on the movements of the Sioux. And Heeley wasn't averse to a saddle jaunt after two days of being cooped up on the boarding train.

As he rode toward the trading post, two men, stripped of every instinct save those of primitive savagery, faced each other in the storeroom, black as a pocket after Kilgore had closed the half-log shutters at the two windows. Stealthy step of sock-clad and moccasined foot ended with a sudden lunge of taut-muscled bodies, striving to drive steel to vitals and simultaneously avoid the counter-thrust.

Lanny's knife swung first and truest as he carried the fight to his shifting enemy. The *skreek* of metal on bone, as his blade encountered yielding flesh, drew a gasp of pain from the man he could not see. A sticky wetness covered fingers and back of hand when he withdrew them, leaping sideways as he detected the swish of a fury-driven arm. Just a nick Stack inflicted on him as Lanny nimbly wheeled.

The plainsman whipped back in his tracks, knife extended to feel for the trader's powerful body. He could not sense Kilgore's immediate presence and held his breath to listen. Soft as were their footfalls, it was not possible to avoid some sound, and Lanny located his enemy on the left, tracing a wary circle apparently, as though his wound had imbued him with greater caution.

Shadler poised on the balls of his feet, stooped and rushed. Clashing steel threw off sparks and two arms like bars of iron were rigid for a moment, each man fending the other's blade with his own. Lanny broke first, to slash downward at his adversary's chest. He felt the buckskin tunic rip under the long blade. But Kilgore turned swiftly as the knife worried at his breast, too swiftly for Lanny to more than sheathe the point in outer muscles. His own body jackknifed, for Kilgore's right arm, driving outward as he pivoted, slashed a long cut, far from severe, over the plainsman's ribs.

His own doubling motion, fingers tense on knife handle, pulled the blade from its sidelong position in the trader's chest. And when Lanny half straightened and weaved in to strike again, the tottering bulk he sought to impale mortally, was gone. He darted recklessly on, stabbing left and right—then paused, panting. Sweat poured from him in the close confinement of the storeroom. He quieted his breathing, partly so as not to reveal his position by the

labored sound, partly to aid hearing in relocating Stack.

"You're no Indian, makin' that chant over a couple of flesh wounds," Lanny taunted, suddenly apprised of Stack's whereabouts by a low cursing across the room. "Won't do to holler enough. This is to the finish!"

"Sure'n hell 'tis!" growled Kilgore. In backing away from the lightning-handed plainsman, his hip had come in contact with something sharp-edged against the wall. He knew what it was before his cautiously groping hand had lifted a trade hatchet from the heap on a low shelf.

THE darkness hid the devilish contortion of his features when he stood erect, balancing the hatchet for the throw. He had more than once competed with his Sioux friends at sticking tomahawks in a warpost. And Lanny Shadler had proven just dangerous enough at close quarters to stir a half-dread in the trader that he would not leave that room, unless he resorted to trickery. He might not cleave Lanny's skull with a throw in the dark, but he should disable him so that he would fall easier victim to raining knife strokes.

Kilgore spoke into that darkness, not sure where Lanny stood, though certain he hadn't crossed the storeroom. "If you've got the nerve, speak out and stand your ground. I'll wade in, get it over with! Game?"

"You bet I am," snarled Lanny.

But he sidestepped softly as he answered, distrustful of his foe. No pad of moccasins came on the heels of his response, but a deadly humming close by emphasized his wisdom in not standing still. The hatchet landed in a big bale of drygoods behind Lanny with a dull *tunk!* Not precisely the sound of steel meeting flesh and bone. But Lanny groaned, realistically, and renewed his grip on knife haft, throwing his feet about as though reeling under a well-nigh fatal blow.

Stack Kilgore fell for this shamming, did not seek to muffle his leaping advance. His seething mind pictured Shadler staggering, his guard lowered, an easy target to stab down. But a chill traveled along the trader's spine. He oozed cold sweat and desperately veered to one side as a man, unseen but patently not helpless, laid steel to his abdomen.

His frantic twist saved him a gut-ripping. He stumbled against the bale where the hatchet had fallen, wrenched his body to the rightabout just as Shadler pounced in. His rising knee punched Kilgore in the midriff, hurling him back, and his left hand, finding the other's jerking wrist, pinned the knife-clutching fingers down. Stack choked curses, writhed like a huge snake. He felt death descending through the air, knew that Lanny's knife was poised for the finishing blow.

At that instant daylight sprang across the room, catching the two wrestling figures in its long golden shaft. Dan Heeley, who had snatched the Springfield rifle from a trooper when he arrived to learn of the silent duel being fought in the back room, stood in the door he had kicked open. The rifle muzzle lined the fighting men and he yelled:

"By gorry, this has gone far enough! Untangle!"

It was not clear to him at first, charging in there from the sun-blazing trade room, whether Lanny or Kilgore was the top man, for both were clad in buckskin. But he did not lower rifle nor alter command when Lanny's face turned toward him, knife hand falling, and backed away from the panting trader.

"Dan, you hadn't ought to interfere with the workin's of justice," said Shadler, scowling. "You dunno this he-wolf like I do!"

"Nor do I care to, bad luck to him," retorted Heeley. "What I'm after is to take you back to camp. You're a vallyable chunk of a lad to the road, don'tcha know it, and I ain't hirin' you to fight crazy duels."

KILGORE had risen from his tumbled merchandise, stood feeling mechanically of his throat, which had escaped being slit open to his ears. He was shaken and showed it, in trembling limbs and the ashen hue of his full lips. He dripped gore, his tunic was slashed, and as he advanced into the light, edging unconsciously away from the stern-eyed Shadler, Heeley wiped a hand across his chin. He glanced from one to the other and half grinned.

"It looks, trader, like I've saved *you* somethin' instead of me bucko meat getter."

"I ain't as bad as I look, mister." Kilgore steadied his voice, taking heart in the knowledge that his wounds were far from deep. "I'm a tough nut, you savvy, and the knife that'll kill me ain't been honed yet."

Lanny tossed the blood-wet blade he had borrowed at Stack's feet. "You damn four-flusher! Heeley, he was so scared I had him, he chucked a hatchet at me. I possumed and he come all spraddled out to pigstick a wounded man. Tough nut, hell!"

Soldiers and laborers had crowded up to the doorway, some shouting that the boarding contractor ought to let them work off their grudge. But Heeley wasn't inclined that way, especially after hearing of Kilgore's treachery. The trader looked capable of it, and Dan Heeley wasn't losing his buffalo hunter, on whose skill the commissary depended, the road builders in turn depending on the commissary.

"Get your boots and guns, and come along, boy," he said gruffly but kindly, handing the Springfield back to the trooper as Lanny preceded him into the trade room. "You come near enough gettin' your man to satisfy both of ye."

Shadler appeared sullen as he tugged on boots, transferred gun belts from the counter to his slim waist. Heeley was boss and another fight could not take place within the camp limits. But he would contrive

a final reckoning with Stack Kilgore somehow. Not only because of Annabelle Yancey, whose sweet face had vanished, never to return, from the Logtown settlement; but for the reason that Lanny deemed Kilgore capable of stirring up the Ogallalas to raids on unprotected camps. He would do it out of revenge, if nothing more. As yet Lanny had no inkling of the trader's desire to end him and procure that beef contract.

Kilgore lounged behind the counter, a gory spectacle with red-stained sleeve, front of tunic ripped wide and blood-soaked, yet disdaining to dress his wounds until Shadler had departed. But for the long cut over his ribs, scarcely bleeding, the buffalo hunter stood unscathed.

His smoky glance sought the glaring Kilgore.

"Stack, it might interest you to know I'll be huntin' near the Red Bluffs, along the Platte, in a day or two. I hear a big herd's makin' a crossin'. Tell your red friends. And come along yourself to make it a real hi-yu occasion."

"I'm no renegade, to side up the Indians," Kilgore declared for the benefit of Heeley, the road hands and the soldiers. "But we ain't through with each other, that's pat."

SHADLER picked up his rifle and the boxes of ammunition, went forth to his waiting horse with the boarding contractor. But the troopers and laborers, barely a handful of the number belonging to the construction outfit, remained to make up lost time in sampling the kind of whisky "sold to the Injuns." There was a large percentage of Platte River mud in the bottom of the keg, and they soon discovered it.

But the quart of "Old Dominion" which Stack Kilgore stowed in his saddle bag as he mounted his half-breed bronc at sundown, was uncut, fiery whisky. The kind he drank himself, too good, usually, for Sioux or Pawnee. It was a gift for Lame Wolf, and never had Stack been generous without an object in view.

Descending night found him far out toward the hills. Though hoofprints and travois tracks no longer were visible in the faint-starred gloom, the trader was in little doubt that Lame Wolf's village would have pitched down on a tributary creek, the Broadwater. He saw its fires within two hours of leaving the post, and would have been well pleased to hear the ululations of dancing warriors.

But the wind carried no message of war-making, to simplify his task. He must start from scratch to persuade Lame Wolf, under "Old Dominion's" potent sway, that a certain white man needed rubbing out.

With barking dogs at the heels of his wild-eyed bronc, Kilgore saluted his Ogallala friends with hand upflung, palm outward. Through the lanes between tepee rows, forming a horseshoe with open end toward the Broadwater, he urged his mount, stopping before one larger than the rest. The lance and bull-hide shield, hair-fringed, of old Lame Wolf stood at the entrance, and Kilgore's moccasined feet touched earth. He thrust a hand in his saddle bag and ducked under the lodge door, surprising the old chief in the bosom of his family.

"How, cola!" nodded Stack, and the old warrior, squatting with a blanket of Kilgore's partly drawn across naked breast, spoke grave greeting.

The squaws, old and young, scrambled outside, and the visitor seated himself in the dull glow of the fire-hole, passing the bottle to Lame Wolf.

"I have ridden far with this gift for my brother." The trader spoke Sioux and Pawnee more correctly than his own tongue, was adept in the hand-talk of the tribes. Bandaged beneath his new buckskin tunic, he revealed nothing of the combat of the afternoon, though his left arm moved a trifle stiffly.

Lame Wolf tucked the bottle under his blanket, face impassive. He clapped his hands, and his favorite squaw, young and comely, entered. She lifted down a redstone pipe from the lodge wall and filled it from a beaded pouch with kinnikinick, mixture of tobacco and willow bark.

Having lighted it with a sliver adroitly fished from the fire, she passed the pipe to her lord and master and retired silently. Lame Wolf took several whiffs and handed it to Kilgore, who imitated. The ceremony made the gift-bearer welcome, but Kilgore waited to state his real business until the old warrior had tipped the bottle, drawn from under blanket folds, more than once.

He knew that, while the Ogallala, a magnificent savage, arrow-straight and full of vigor for the warpath despite his years, hated the "Iron Horse" people as he did all of the white race—with ample justification—he was no longer for war. Lame Wolf was skeptical now of ever turning the people from the rising sun back to their own land. He had seen the best fighters of the Sioux and other tribes fall like leaves before the superior weapons of the invaders—all to no purpose.

He was not minded to waste the life-blood of remaining warriors on battlefields where the redman inevitably must be defeated. Age and bitter experience had brought him wisdom, even though his hatred still smoldered and the younger generation was prone to turn deaf ear to his counsels of peace.

At that moment, without the chief's lodge, shadowy figures lurked, among them a hawk-faced youth who exchanged low, eager gutturals with his companions. They were all young men, hot-headed, irresponsible, bound together in hopes of warfare against the whites; all members of the Ogallala society of warriors, the Hawks. And the eager talker, Burnt Thigh, was a sub-chief, whose coup stick had touched many a fallen white man in battle.

Kilgore, the trader, was their brother, Burnt Thigh was saying. He must have important news of the Iron Horse people, to come so soon after the village had left the neighborhood of the trading post. Perhaps it meant war, and war Burnt Thigh would have, he declared savagely, even though Lame Wolf was apathetic or wholly against it. His Brother Hawks echoed the sentiment low but passionately.

Inside Lame Wolf's tepee, Stack Kilgore was watching the fever of anger rise in the chief's eyes as he drank.

"All white men are no good!" asserted Lame Wolf and looked straight at his visitor. "You are a white man!"

"But with a red heart," Kilgore assured him. "My own race has done me harm, as it has harmed the redman, and I have no love for it."

"The pony soldiers and walk-a-heaps are many," contended Lame Wolf. "You are asking us to attack the Iron Horse people, who are well protected and have many guns better than ours. It is a trap!"

Kilgore raised a hand in protest. "Would brother do that to brother? No, chief, I'm asking only that you

kill one white man who hunts the buffalo. He will be hunting near the Red Bluffs one, two suns from now. Destroy him and his butchers and I will show you how Lame Wolf's band can sell cattle to the Iron Horse people, through me. They can buy the best guns, plenty guns and cartridges, to raid outlying camps which the pony soldiers cannot reach in time. The white hunter," he lied, "has many Sioux scalps as trophies."

Fire flickered in the old chief's eye, then it died. "But the whoa-haws will keep the Iron Horse people strong to build their road. It is foolish to do that. Better to drive away or kill the whoa-haws and starve the Iron Horse people."

Kilgore was patient, for he had much to lose if Lanny Shadler lived and got that beef contract. He reminded Lame Wolf that the whites were resourceful, that they could not be starved out. Wasn't it better for the Indians to profit by selling them the cattle they would procure somehow? Thus they could arm the tribe with guns as good as the soldiers', to make successful raids.

While Lame Wolf wavered, growing more inflamed as the whisky coursed through his veins, Kilgore thrust home his clinching argument:

"The young chief, Burnt Thigh, is for war. I heard him but today say it, at the post. And all the society of Hawks are ready to follow him. If Lame Wolf does not decide in council, the young men will go to war without him."

Bold speech, but Lame Wolf was well aware that his authority might be flouted. A chief gained obedience only in so far as it pleased the majority of fighting men to obey. He rose to his feet, fumbling at the blanket edge to fold it closer about him. His step was not too steady and the war-light blazed in his eyes. He stalked past, and Kilgore stood up behind him, knowing he had practically won the toss. Presently a camp crier would be making the rounds of the lodges calling the braves to council.

Passing out of the tepee at Lame Wolf's moccasined heels, the trader caught glimpses of the Brother Hawks padding away. It was a good omen. One face was turned his way, sharp and cruel under its paint, the face of Burnt Thigh and Kilgore grinned. Burnt Thigh, more easily handled than the wiser old chief, should prove the trader's ablest ally at the council and sound the tocsin of red war

Before the coming of another sun, the war drums throbbed in Lame Wolf's village and a renegade white man gloated over a victory that seemed assured.

CHAPTER III

War-Whoop Menace

THE mighty Irish were singing under a brassy sky, some still wearing coats and caps left over from army service. Their hearty chant rolled to the hills and back again, timed to the clang of falling rail and ringing stroke of sledge. Singing toilers could not be defeated by all the valiant, ululating tribes who opposed the invasion of the Iron Horse.

End of track was a scene of apparent confusion—but apparent only. The miles of steel were lengthening steadily, and the wonder of it still impressed Lanny Shadler after months of constant association.

He stood that morning beside the Sibley tent of Major John Pladwell, of the Second Cavalry, the reins of his mount in one hand, his two meat wagons, with butcher-teamsters on the seats, ready to roll. Pladwell, red-faced, with graying hair and mustache, not exactly new to Indian-fighting, was nodding soberly, shifting unlighted cigar in thin lips. Dan Heeley was there, also, looking troubled.

"You hadn't ought've challenged Kilgore that way, boy," he complained

to Shadler. "The blackguard ain't at the post this mornin'."

Lanny showed pleasure at the news.

"That means, I reckon, he'll be after my hair before sundown. It's what I wanted. We feuded back in Texas, but that ain't all. Lame Wolf fought the covered wagons, but since then he's been quiet, except for small raids—not keen any more to stop the whites. Yet this Kilgore is likely to prod him into action, if he, Kilgore, has anything to gain.

"He'll sell the reds rifles to use against us, good ones, if he ain't done it already. It's best to catch him red-handed before he can stir too much hell, and plant him. I sure expect him to jump me with a war party. So watch for grass fire smoke out toward the Red Bluffs, major, and send your yellow-legs humpin'!"

"It's your risk, Lanny," said the officer. "Troop C will have orders to stand by for 'boots and saddles'. The Indians often fire the grass, but we'll know this time it's a signal for help. If you ask me, I like your nerve and your plan—scotching a snake before it bites you is the smart way. Luck!"

Shadler stepped into the saddle and jogged forth from the white-tented cavalry camp. Behind him butcher-teamsters exploded whips and wheels turned as the mule teams responded. Outward bound to hunt buffalo—and trouble.

As Lame Wolf had said, the Iron Horse people were prepared for stout resistance. Here at the railroad camp, the tie-layers, rail-layers, spikers and gaugers were under guard of the troops—temporarily. If the cavalry rode to succor graders or engineers, working far ahead, the trackmen could fort up in boarding and construction cars, every car loop-holed, and depress the fighting spirit of wild-riding horsemen. Stacked rifles stood at intervals along the right of way, for the laborers to seize and gouge out pits in the sand with gun butts if the attack did not warrant retreat to better cover.

With the tie-layers setting the pace, the rail-layers crowded them close, singing lustily, every move in rhythm and not a motion lost. Behind them steamed the wood-burning construction engine, to dump from its string of "flats" the supplies to feed that westward leaping trail of steel. Its bell ringing, the flare-stacked locomotive then backed off along completed track, bound to distant supply base for reloading.

LANNY SHADLER rode at ground-eating lope into the silence of the brown plains. The incessant clang of rails and sledges, the chant of the road hands, grew dim and dimmer. Not until near noon did he sight, against the skyline, a slow-moving mass. The Red Bluffs frowned above the shallow Platte, and now the word of a Pawnee scout, that one of the last big herds was crossing at that point, could be believed.

"There's the meat!" Lanny yelled, pulling gun strap over his head, and screwing in the saddle to face the wagoners. "Watch sharp for Stack and his hostiles!"

He wouldn't be hunting buffalo much longer, whether or not the Sioux got his hair, for the next jump of the railroad camp would take them into the cow country of the Weeping Water. The spurs quickened his mount's pace, and with wide hat brim flaring back against low crown, Lanny speedily outdistanced the meat wagons. Making a downwind approach, he swung from the leather at a three hundred yard range. A buffalo wallow flung across the path of the hunter, his objective point. From the small sink, worn by the buffalo in coating their hides with mud, he could pick off the great brutes while hidden by the grass still flourishing on the rim, though repeated "rubbings" had obliterated every blade in the hollow.

Dropping into the wallow, Lanny crawled up the farther side, rifle at trail. He laid the Sharps on the rim,

sighted on an eight-inch spot behind the foreleg of the nearest cow. The Sharps boomed. Its lungs pierced, the cow swayed and buckled to its knees. No sound; but a steady gush of crimson from nose and mouth. It staggered up again, tenacious of life, shaking its head, eyes staring stupidly and rapidly glazing. Again the great beast tumbled, this time to stay, an inert hulk awaiting the skinner's knife.

Shadler, peering through smoke, was mechanically reloading. The animals closest to the fallen cow, getting none of the blood scent or odor of burnt powder, stared at the lifeless one, snorted a little and moved away, but not far. The roaring voice of the buffalo gun meant nothing to them, as long as the wind carried the smells the hunter's way.

From this stand, Shadler tallied twenty buffalo—then the herd caught the blood scent! Those on the outer edge of the herd were staring at the sink and bellowing. They wheeled, tails spiked up, quickly communicating their terror to the heart of the grazing mass. As the herd—a legion of brown, shaggy bodies—rolled toward the Platte crossing at lumbering trot that was faster than it seemed, Lanny scrambled from the sink and hit leather. His "kill" wasn't completed, for haunch meat was all that the butchers cut away for commissary use.

He reined for the dust fog traveling riverward, charged alongside tailenders. He dropped one. But the stampeding buffalo were as swift as his horse, and in the three miles to the Platte from that wallow, he laid a trail of five carcasses and called it a day. Back he jogged over the rolls in the plain. The wagons were moving among the slain buffalo. He saw the huge butcher knives flashing in the sun as weather-stained "Sandburr" Beeson and his mate carved out the hams.

Lanny passed them, dismounted and heel-squatted in the hot sun, with his pipe going. The sound of his horse lazily cropping the curly grass made him drowsy, but he dared not sleep. He watched the northeast for sign of the expected war party. Had Kilgore's absence from the post meant nothing sinister, after all?

FINALLY Sandburr came rattling back, pipe-smoke drifting hindward over his shoulder, and with his wagon piled high. The other butcher-teamster was two miles farther off, but driving in. It had been a good "kill." Shadler rose and swung aboard his horse, and as the first buffalo wagon arrived, fell into the pace of the mule-span.

"Where's your Injuns?" grinned Sandburr.

"You wait!" was all Lanny said.

Traveling east, they were eight miles from the railroad when the tranquil mood of the plains was broken.

"Comin' yon!" Sandburr shook out his long whiplash, making the announcement in matter-of-fact tone. He was a nerveless being, this oldster.

Lanny also had seen. It was a sight to make a man's scalp feel loose. The mouth of a ravine northward, was spewing a redskin horde. They yelled and shook guns and lances as they raced, not in close formation but in the order of their ponies' speed. Lanny counted nearly a hundred before the ravine ceased erupting. Terrific odds, and the white men had a long run to end of track, with horse and mules decidedly not fresh.

"Touch 'em up, Sandy!" Lanny cried to the butcher, and glanced back to see the second wagon still far in the rear. "We'll try runnin'. But if Kilgore's along, I sure don't want to miss the varmint!"

The mules spurted under the hide-chipping lash. They scarcely needed the whip, as they were ready to bolt at the first war-whoop. No white man's yell could match its quality of menace. Lanny, spurring to keep even with the wagon, had his head turned

to the left. It was the Ogallalas, all right, but through the smother of dust he couldn't discern any rider resembling Stack Kilgore.

Probably he was in bonnet and war paint, disguised in case one of the hunting outfit escaped back to camp. He could never return to his trading post if the suspicion of his renegade activities was confirmed by a survivor.

"Can't outride 'em!" Lanny shouted at Sandburr, careening along in his meat wagon, the mules scooting with bellies laid to the ground. The red pony riders were fast cutting down their lead. "Fort up, while we can!"

"K'rect!" Businesslike Sandburr, with never a tremor in his tough, wiry body, slammed booted foot into the brake. He hauled in the frantic team so suddenly that they sat down and the wagon rolled onto them. Beeson jumped off.

Almost as soon as Lanny could rein his dancing mount and, kicking off the stirrups, slide earthward, Sandburr had unhitched the mules and tied them to the wagon tongue.

"Now the hams!" Shadler directed, tying his horse with hasty knot of reins beside the mules.

Beeson leaped upon a wheel. He heaved off hairy haunches while Shadler arranged them, as well as he could, in a barricade around the wheels, fast as the butcher threw them down. While they worked, sweating from every pore, on the wind drifted sound of hoofs and wolf-keyed yells, as the Ogallalas neared.

Grabbing the Springfield breech loaders stowed in the wagon, hunter and butcher slid between the wheels. Belly-flop, facing opposite directions as the Sioux were sure to circle, they made ready to repel the screeching band. The Springfield was a lighter, handier gun for fast targeting than Lanny's Sharp .50, though the caliber was the same.

At full gallop, to within rifle shot, the Indians came. Then they swerved and circled. Some poured arrows and lead from erect seat in saddle pads, disdaining cover. Older and more cautious braves hung low on the offside of racing ponies and shooting under the necks of the animals. The lethal aim of the embattled whites soon sent even the most reckless hunting the offside of their mounts for protection. Three were down, spread-eagled in the grass, a hundred yards from the wagon fort.

"Mule gone," Sandburr announced from his side as one of the team, leaded vitally, slumped at the end of its tether. The animal rendered frantic its mate and Lanny's buffalo runner.

Lanny hoped Beeson wouldn't say next, "Your horse down," but he hadn't much time to think about it. He was giving smoky attention to that fast-moving ring of feather-tipped warriors, of bay and buckskin and paint ponies, the latter predominating in the colorful circle. Arrows quivered in the wagon box, in the earth close by the wheels. The hams, serving so well as catch-all for the missiles of the galloping horsemen, were by this time well seasoned with feathered shafts and bullets.

As yet the plainsman and his butcher had suffered not a scratch. The Ogallalas, with three riderless ponies in their midst, had the edge of their ardor dulled. Lanny recognized old Lame Wolf as he darted from the circle and, well out of danger, halted to call off the attack. Lowering his smoke-wisping Springfield and loading as he looked, the plainsman strained his eyes to pick out the form of Kilgore as the band tailed after Lame Wolf and dropped from sweat-stained ponies. But the crowding and shifting of the warriors prevented his recognition of the trader if he was among them.

"What happened to Mike?" Shadler referred to the second butcher as he faced Beeson briefly. "Run for the river, did he? They ain't paid him any attention yet. Can't wait for Mike

to fetch help, though. While the reddies are powwowin' how to dig us out, I'll send up that smoke. The pickets ought to see it quick enough. Flat country, except for low ridges and hills, between here and end of track."

"Yeh," said Sandburr composedly. He scratched a match on a wheel-spoke to relight the cob pipe which, throughout the rifle play, had remained firmly clamped in his teeth.

The buffalo hunter grinned his appreciation of the little man's imperturbability. "You're the original iceberg, Sandy. Have a blizzard in hell when you hit there."

A west wind was blowing, to carry the smoke eastward up the Platte, which at this point flowed a mile south of Shadler's wagon fort. Sprawled across the hams, block of sulphur matches in hand, Lanny endeavored to fire the grass. He cursed attempts which failed, expecting every minute the council would break up and another charge be launched.

Lanny slid farther out, his body shielding match flare from the breeze, and a sun-cured patch blazed up. He fanned judiciously with his hat and the flame leaped on, humming, and presently a little smoke cloud was rising. All summer that short, curly grass had been curing, and once the fire caught fairly, it raced. There was nothing to impede it for two miles, where a wide creek cutting its path at right angles should halt the spread of flame. Two miles were more than enough for Lanny's purpose.

The Ogallalas saw the smoke billows rolling skyward and knew it was a signal. Yells pealed and pony hoofs beat the turf. Shadler lunged for the safe side of the ham-walled enclosure, grabbing up his breech-loader.

"Over here, Sandy!" he shouted, perceiving that the charge was not to break and circle as before. "They're comin' solid, aim to ride us down!"

Beeson's short figure flopped beside him. Shoulder to shoulder they fired, reloaded and fired again, until the rifle barrels were hot. Ponies went floundering, some pinning their riders. One Sioux lurched on his mount's neck, but did not fall. He had tied himself on, as warriors sometimes did to prevent an enemy taking their scalps in battle. The pony carried the dead rider off the field as the vigorous defense of the white man rolled the red tide back upon itself.

Out of rifle range again, Lanny and Sandburr could see the Indians pointing and gesticulating—the trail of smoke drifting eastward would bring the soldiers in haste, but there was still plenty of time to count coup on the meat-getters. But how to do it without further sacrifice of men and ponies?

That charge had killed off many, and there would be loud mourning in the village on the Broadwater. The bucks scattered and, from behind grassy knolls and barriers of horseflesh, they laid long-range siege. If they could tease whites into exhausting their ammunition, a dash upon the meat-fort would involve no danger and net them a pair of scalps.

"Bet old Lame Wolf's got a bellyful, but the young braves won't quit," Shadler remarked, wiping buckskin sleeve across powder-smudged face. "Slow on the shells, Sandy, the yellow-legs may be long comin'."

Lanny had far from given up hope that Stack Kilgore was one of the party. He thought, in fact, it might be Kilgore's urging that had stiffened the offensive. Whenever a warrior knelt to launch an arrow beneath the wagon box Shadler or Beeson almost always knocked him flat. And in time there were fewer bowstrings twanging, while trade guns whanged more vigorously. An hour slipped by. If the direction of the wind had favored, long since the Ogallalas would have started a fire rolling way onward and crept behind its smoke to a hand-to-hand assault.

There was a lull in the firing.

"What're they lookin' at?" Shadler

suddenly exclaimed. "Can't be the swaddies so soon!"

Warriors were staring eastward. More than a score pulled ponies to their feet, bounded astride and went skimming toward the Platte, avoiding the burned area.

CHAPTER IV

PLAINSMAN'S TARGET

AT first Lanny and Sandburr could not discern what it was that had drawn off so many of their besiegers in that wild ride riverward. The screen of smoke hid all. The Indians left facing the buffalo wagon were not paying their former strict attention, but gazing into the southeast. Lanny noted this, but he knew better than to attempt a breakaway with the heavy wagon—it wouldn't get far.

Wind-action presently shredded the grass fire smoke sufficiently to reveal the gray ribbon of Overland stage trail along the Platte, and the plainsman struck Sandburr's crowding shoulder in his excitement.

"See it! The daily stage from Omaha. It's broke through the reds' line and is runnin' away!"

Beeson was moved to the extent of a blistering curse and gripped his Springfield tighter. The four-horse Concord—one of many which would cease its dangerous runs east and west when the U. T. & E. completed its track—was lurching crazily ahead of screeching pony riders, relieved of driver control even as the men under the meat wagon caught sight of it. Pierced through by an arrow, the driver was leaning outward, apparently blindly clutching at any handhold he could secure. But he pitched down in the rolling dust, and Ogallalas raced with coup-sticks thrust to the fore as his body doubled over in the road.

The stage coach people were easier victims than the straight shooting buffalo hunters! Sprawled on the coach roof, the shotgun guard and one or two outside passengers were pouring a steady fire into the horsemen tearing to catch up. A pony nose-dived, hurling its rider off. As the warrior rose up, shaking his hide shield, one of the coach defenders shot him flat again.

"Hell! They ain't got a chance," muttered Lanny Shadler. "It's a wonder they didn't turn back off the road, bein' warned by the smoke and shootin' over here that the Indians were out. But maybe the driver figured to run by before they noticed him. He sure paid for that mistake."

Six-shooters and carbines spurted fire from either coach window. The passengers were resisting stoutly. Four or five Ogallalas, riding up between the coach's offside and the river bank, frightened the team off the road. Lanny saw an arrow streak the air. But it slithered off the rump of a wheeler.

The Indians, in fighting the buffalo hunters, had run down the steam in their horses, else the Concord and its human cargo could not have escaped thus far. There seemed, after that arrow failed to kill the wheeler, some measure of reluctance on the Indians' part to drop the horses. And the reason was, doubtless, that they had lost many ponies trying to override Lanny and his butcher. They evidently had meant to replace the slain stock if the coach could be captured in any other way. Certainly it had little chance to escape, as Shadler had woefully remarked.

AT runaway pace, the Concord soon passed so near the men beneath the meat wagon that they had clear view of a girl's pale face at the nigh window. Pale and pretty, but with courage struggling for mastery of fear. She held a carbine, apparently empty and with no means of reloading it, for suddenly she tossed it behind her. Hoisting slim body to the lower sill and outward, she gripped anything that would support her lithe weight.

She was no sunbonneted woman of the settlements. Broad-brimmed hat, woollen blouse and fringed skirt proclaimed her a dweller on the cattle frontier, probably the Weeping Water westward.

"Look, Sandy, she's aimin' to reach the box and take the reins!" Shadler squeezed his companion's arm in a flurry of admiration. "The lines are hangin' high, caught on the brake lever. She thinks she can outrun the Sioux. I wonder—"

Patently that was the frontier girl's intention. Watching her climb through that smoky window, where all faces but hers had disappeared, even Sandburr lost his calm. He shouted encouragingly, though the sound could not have reached her above the howling din of pursuing Ogallalas. With one booted foot on the sill, a hand gripping the upper frame, she stretched the other arm toward the guard rail on the roof. The coach swayed perilously, but she could not be shaken off.

"I'm helpin' her—stay with the wagon!" Shadler yelled and scrambled from beneath the wagon on the river side, trailing his rifle.

Sandburr would have followed, but orders were orders, and he turned over to poke his Springfield at the clutter of warriors on the north. Intent on the race, they hadn't observed Shadler's move until he appeared by the wagon tongue, pulling the reins free and rising suddenly to the back of his horse. He was off toward the coach and its trailers at a thudding gallop, his mount needing no spur to make a flashing start.

A flight of arrows swooped in Lanny's wake and more ponies were jerked up by jaw-ropes. Sandburr cuddled cheek to brown rifle stock, and the first two Sioux who darted forward, rolled out of saddle pads. But the rest kept on coming, giving the wagon a wide berth until the butcher's gun was no longer effective.

"Where the hell's them yellowlegs?" Sandburr cast a hurried glance toward the pall of smoke eastward, hoping to see it split by a column of army blue, riding hard. "If things keep a-goin' from bad to worse, thisaway, me and the lone mule will have to take after Lanny. Let's see—" he crouched and peered southwestward over the buffalo haunches—"how the boy's gettin' on. That's Texas guts for you, r'arin' out like he done!"

Riding to meet death on paint ponies, for the sake of that frontier girl desperately trying to reach the high seat, Lanny Shadler did not immediately attract notice. He was too far away for accurate rifle-shot when he saw two riders push past the swift-turning rear wheel, one raising his trade gun on the straining back of the girl.

Lanny's own rifle jumped to shoulder rest. If he had cramped trigger, the slug would have plowed short. But it wasn't necessary to waste his lead. The second rider abruptly leaned and struck up the shining barrel as it jetted flame. An aquiline face, war painted and hideous, switched toward the other in brief anger. Lanny's heart beat faster.

"The fellow that stopped him is no redskin," he thought. "It's Stack Kilgore, that's who! Hardly know him in that war-bonnet and Indian trappin's. But the double-barreled hellion was always a wolf after women in Texas and he'd like that one on the coach to play with, damn his rotten soul!"

THE image of Annabelle Yancey stalked through Shadler's mind as he bore down on stage coach and pursuers, now using his spurs and dropping the reins on his mount's neck. Knee pressure was enough to guide the animal. He was heedless of the yells behind him; the enemy in front was much closer. He fired and a redskin racing to head the stage horses pitched from saddle pad.

Lanny slung the Springfield in

saddle boot and drew Colt .44's from thigh-brushing holsters, as pistol range became effective. The Sioux were compelled to switch some of their attention to the plainsman, who rode as though he had an army at his back.

Still the stage coach bounded on, eluding capture, and still the frontier girl clutched the baggage rail and strove to swing herself to the vacant driver's seat. But one arm would not bear her weight, and the Concord's wild careening evidently made her afraid to release her grip on the upper window frame. Of her plight and indecision, Lanny Shadler was not then aware. He had discovered the buffalo head, the paint-daubed face of Stack Kilgore in that ruck of red riders, and his pistols flared to cut the trader down.

Stack fired in turn, his rifle bullet clipping the wind-whipped tawny mane beneath Lanny's low-crowned hat. Both men were shooting from ground-spurning horses, traveling at sharp tangent. It was remarkable that they placed lead so near the mark. A pistol ball missed Stack's thigh, but his painted pony reared, screaming, a horribly human sound. Over they crashed in a burst of dust. Lanny would have pounded close to lead-whip Kilgore's squirming form had not arrow-slinging Sioux ridden between them.

The plainsman, crouching in the saddle, turned his mount with a mighty jerk. Ahead the westward road was clear, the stage horses traveling at undiminished speed, apparently trying to jump through their collars.

At the moment when the rescuer swung his horse to gallop parallel with the coach, the girl found courage to stretch her other hand upward. As both hands gripped and her foot left the window-sill, a lurch of the coach flung her body outward in dizzy fashion—but she clung! Then she chinned herself in a supreme effort, and her right leg, knee bent, was lifted over the side rail of the driver's box.

Next moment she fell across the seat, panting, horrified eyes pinned to the brake lever. The long lines had slipped off and lay on the dusty backs below, threatening to slip down and entangle the hind legs of the wheelers. She grasped the seat rail with both hands, only half conscious of the groans of express messenger and two passengers, arrow-spitted, dying on the roof. Her round-eyed attention was held by the rider in buckskin and plains hat, dashing alongside the coach.

Lanny's six-shooters, reloaded as he rode, were causing discomfort to the Sioux if nothing more. The Indians were losing ground as they dodged his smoky lead, though he missed as often as he scored because of high speed and billowing dust. One young chief, with headdress of buffalo horns, rode hardest of the lot, launching arrow after arrow from beneath the pony's neck. It was Burnt Thigh, and Lanny would have saved himself and the railroad much future trouble had his slugs drilled the painted mask of the sub-chief.

A BUGLE blared across the plains and most of the Indians jerked upright, to gaze behind. That sound heartened Lanny, though he realized the redskin horde might have his scalp before the soldiers could ride close enough to scatter them. But Troop C was in the field and he had a fighting chance. The day was closing. Soon the long shadows of night would be stealing over the plains.

Even Burnt Thigh had halted. Lanny recharged his pistols, holstered the pair, glancing at the girl hanging to the driver's seat, and for the first time their eyes met.

"The reins are gone!" She swept one hand downward in despairing gesture, though the bugle notes had put color in her cheeks.

From her high perch, above the rolling dust, she had seen the troopers charging, spreading out to take the Ogallalas on the flank. Carbines cracked flatly as white and red horsemen collided, the Sioux thus caught in flank attack making a running fight toward the shallow river.

Lanny just barely caught the girl's words, though, without hearing, he would have understood why she hadn't pulled the stage horses back into the smoother going of the Overland road. Lanny rode his spurs in a mad effort to check the leaders. The lathered, frantic four-in-hand was dragging the coach slantwise across a bluff, straight toward a drop of sixty feet to the river, where the outfit would be wrecked.

The plainsman's horse shot by the wheelers, crept along the straining flank of the nigh lead horse. The edge of the bluff wasn't ten yards distant when Shadler's leaning figure twisted to the right, sinewy hand welded to cheek strap. His yell, the old rebel yell of the Confederacy, split the thunder of hoofs. The head of the nigh leader was clamped muzzle to muzzle with that of his own horse as the latter wheeled in a short curve, powerfully dragging the stage horses along.

Harness leather creaked, but did not snap. The coach skidded and rocked as though swung at the lash end of a huge whip. It nearly overturned, but righted itself with many a protest from leather braces.

The leaders were anchored with looped lines to Lanny's dependable buffalo runner when he sprang from saddle. He dashed to unhook the tugs on the right, then stepped nimbly across the pole to bound down on the other side. The Indians were milling down the trail, undecided whether or not to flee before the soldiers caught up, but Lanny expected them to come on in a last effort to grab his hair and the girl. Stack Kilgore would argue there was still time.

The spent stage horses were drooping, one trying to lie down. But at a sudden screech in concert from the Sioux, as they got into motion again, the exhausted animals fanned legs in renewed flight. Neck-looped to the leaders, Lanny's mount was forced to gallop with them, but they headed back into the plain and could be found when wanted.

Lanny, thanking his stars he had unhitched in time to prevent the stage being dragged farther, stood by a front wheel, shouting for the girl to come down. She seemed bewildered. They must take refuge in the

coach, poor shelter though it afforded. The whooping of the Indians, scudding toward the stalled Concord on the bluff, drowned out any sound made by advancing cavalry, but Lanny felt confident Troop C was hammering to reach them. Old Sandburr was back there to direct the "yellow-legs" to the right spot.

THE girl half fell into Lanny's arms and he carried her to the door, wrenching it open and thrust-

ing the yielding form inside as an arrow struck and quivered in the ground beside him. He ducked in, slammed the bullet-scarred door, bending low as he pulled his Colts.

"Keep down!" he said to the girl, glancing briefly at the other passengers, crouched in corners of doubtful safety, either wounded, dead or scared to death. Small wonder, with the blood-chilling cry of the Ogallalas ringing closer every instant.

"If you have any shells for a carbine—" began the girl, sitting back on her boot heels.

"You keep down!" repeated the plainsman. "This'll soon be over."

A bullet hummed through the window, and out at the far side. Lanny's knees hit the floor, hard by the nigh door. Appearing to listen, he suddenly jerked up head and shoulders, his filled hands thrusting outward. Pony riders were wheeling by, shooting as they passed. The blaze of his Colt .44's unseated a warrior, dropped the pony of another. He squinted against pluming smoke, saw a painted face which caused his thumbs to rock hammers in a hasty double discharge.

The girl crouched at his broad back heard his fervent curse. She thought he had been hit, but it wasn't that at all. Lanny had beaded Kilgore, but at the instant of thumbing the hammers, the trader, knowing he was the plainsman's target, slid Indian-fashion over his pony's barrel. He had mounted a riderless horse after Lanny shot the other one from under him.

"Worst Indian of the lot!" raged Shadler as his enemy galloped out of pistol range, then swung erect to drive a slug from long rifle against the window frame.

Lanny didn't even wince as splinters needled his flesh; he was too enraged. He thought of springing out and challenging the renegade to personal combat. But he knew that those wheeling red horsemen would riddle him the moment he quit cover, with never a chance to align sights on Kilgore.

The *spat-spat* of carbines sliced through the whooping and the thunder of Shadler's Colts. He protruded his head dangerously to see the guidon of the Second Cavalry fluttering on the crest of a dust wave back along the road. Kilgore and his Indians swept toward the narrow valley lying between this bluff and the next one, galloping hard toward the river below.

Lanny hung out of the coach window, aiming his last shots at the retreating figures. Had his horse been handy, he would have joined the charge. The bluff resounded to the heavy hoofbeats of racing troopers. The girl uttered a choking little cry and leaned against Shadler.

He turned and caught her.

"You're not going to faint now, miss?"

"No! No!" she denied vehemently, but she looked very white. After the long strain of keeping nerves in hand, reaction had set in.

Lanny lifted her to a vacant space on the front seat, watching her fluttering eyelids with concern. She was a darned pretty girl, tanned a golden brown; with hazel eyes, and dark curls shaken loose from tilted hat, and a fine mouth. Outside, the roar of running battle was shredding out, but the buffalo hunter did not heed.

"Anybody got a jolt of whisky?" Shadler demanded, with a quick look around. He seized the flask handed up by a bearded man on the floor, whose shirt front was bloody. "Look as if you needed it yourself, pard. I only want a snort for the lady."

CHAPTER V

Buckskin Empire Builder

WARY of ambush among the sandhills across the river, Troop C, responding to the brass-throated call of "Retreat!" did not pursue as the Ogallalas flogged through the water and disappeared in the pony-high grass on the far embankment. The fight-drunk expression died out of Captain Billy Walbank's lean face as he trotted, with sergeant-major and bugler, back toward the stage coach, its bulk growing dim in the fading light.

Rearward the troopers straggled in, shouting to one another. A few there were who would not again answer roll call, but it was all in the day's work for a soldier and the Ogallalas had left many slain behind. They would slip back to recover the bodies after the troops had gone.

Shadler was lighting the coach lamps as the captain reined over beside him.

"Bad mess here, cap'n," said the plainsman, turning. "Not a man left to drive except a couple Easterners who don't know sic 'em. They're the only ones saved their skins whole. The lady here, Miss Judith Carfax, says she can tool the outfit to the next station, Rock Springs, but—"

Captain Walbank for the first time observed the girl standing by the open coach door. He touched fingers to his cap and slid wearily from the saddle.

"Hardly to be thought of, Miss Carfax," said the officer. "Those Sioux are just across the river. I can supply an escort—glad to."

"Thank you, captain. I'm not afraid." Judith Carfax had proved she wasn't, indeed, that hectic afternoon, despite a brief fainting spell. "And the Indians don't like to attack after dark, do they?"

"No, not usually, but a white man's leadin' 'em," Lanny broke in. "I'll make the trip, myself, hitchin' my horse behind to ride back on. That fits, eh, cap'n?"

"Sure, Lanny. I'll take your wagons through." The cavalryman leaned against his horse. "Your wounded passengers aren't likely to find a doctor at Rock Springs, but maybe someone's there who can patch 'em up. We didn't get to you any too soon, hunter."

"But a miss is good as a mile," grunted the plainsman. "You'll have

to round up the stage horses and my hay-burner. They're tied together, somewhere out yonder." He tossed an arm toward the dark plain.

Presently a squad of troopers were riding in search of the runaways.

Lanny, with the girl's and the captain's assistance, was making the wounded passengers as comfortable as possible for the trip, when two heavy wagons rumbled out on the bluff. The plainsman turned to greet Sandburr and Mike, the latter calling as he set the brake:

"Don't think I deserted you none, Lanny. When the reds lit down, I drove into the bottoms, not seein' how I could help by showin' myself. When I seen your smoke signal risin', I allowed to set tight and wait for the swaddies. I saved the meat, anyway."

"This here load of mine," broke in Sandburr, "will sure give the camp cooks fits, diggin' out lead pills and arrers. But say, boy—" he lifted something from the seat—"look what I fetched you! The topknot and bonnet of old Lame Wolf. The varmint done bit a bullet when cap charged the first time."

Lanny glanced at the dangling memento of the Ogallala chief who hadn't wanted to go to war. Then he turned to look at the set face of Judith Carfax, revealed in the glow of a coach lamp.

"Not for me, Sandy," Shadler retorted. "Lame Wolf deserved a better end. Stack Kilgore used him as a cat's-paw, hoodled him into that fight. Now the young chiefs, fiery for hell and a hair-raise, will be easy drivin' for that damn renegade!"

Judith Carfax had started forward, laid a hand on Lanny's buckskin sleeve. "Did you say Stack Kilgore?"

"That was the name, Miss Carfax."

"Oh, please call me Judith, Lanny. This Kilgore—the name's quite familiar. I'm from the Weeping Water country, a hundred miles west, and about two years ago, cattle rustlers were ruining my father's herds and his neighbors'. They formed a vigilance committee, found the rustlers' dugout ranch and hung two brothers named Kilgore, but a third escaped. The hang-rope broke, he tumbled into the Weeping Water and managed to swim away. Is it the same man, do you think?"

"I know it!" Lanny's teeth clicked. "Just as I suspected, Stack and his brothers were up to their old Texas tricks, though, when I walked into his tradin' post back east, Stack claimed the neighbors wouldn't let 'em be. Heh! Good reasons why not. Stack himself is under suspicion of havin' murdered a young woman in Texas.

"He—say, I'll bet he recognized you on the coach—Judith! Your back was turned and he knocked up the gun of a brave aimin' to bore you. I'd hate for any woman to fall into Stack's hands. And in your case, with revenge drivin' him for what the vigilantes done—"

She understood, as Lanny seemed to have difficulty verbally conveying his exact thoughts. "I'd rather have the Indians shoot me in the back," Judith made grim choice, quietly.

Half an hour later, with the coach lamps out, his saddle horse tied behind, Lanny boosted the range girl to the high seat and climbed up at her heels, reins in hand. When the whip cracked the four-in-hand surged into collars wearily and the coach swung away from the bluff, down toward the faintly marked stage road. Sandburr and Mike turned their heavy wagons eastward as Captain Billy Walbank rose to the saddle, facing his loose-ranked troop. The captain had made final offer of an escort, but he felt confident that Shadler alone would get the stage through if any one man could.

Rocking westward, Lanny kept his eyes skinned for pony riders crossing the river. But at the end of the second mile he relaxed. All of Kilgore's persuasiveness, obviously,

could not prod the Ogallalas into action again that night. Though the trader had no knowledge of Lanny's substituting for the scalped driver, the presence of Judith Carfax aboard was enough to lure him after the coach. But the miles reeled back, carrying them each moment nearer the Overland stage station, and Kilgore did not appear.

"So you're from Texas, too, Judith?" Lanny addressed the quiet figure beside him, wondering slightly at her preoccupation. "Your father busted by the War, no doubt, and moved to the Weepin' Water to make a fresh start?"

"Lock, stock and barrel." He glimpsed her smile in the gloom. "Plenty of cattle, but no market. No market up here, either, but the railroad's going to change that, Dad and his neighbors say. They're terribly anxious to have it come through our part of the country."

Lanny thought of his beef contract. "Maybe, then, he'd like to help. You see, my job's with the commissary mainly. As the buffalo don't range extreme western Nebraska any more, I've got to find some cowman who'll supply us regularly with beef on the hoof at a low price. Reckon your father would talk contract?"

"I'm sure of it, Lanny! When will you be in our neck of the woods?"

"Less'n a month we'll be on the edge of the Weepin' Water range. The paddies are layin' two miles and more of track a day. The construction boss, Price, was a general in the army—a hard driver, but the men work their heads off for him. He's got the gift of leadership."

"He must have—two miles a day, more than two! Dad'll be delighted to hear it. Our ranch is the Fiddleback; I'll tell you how to reach it. Be sure to come, won't you?"

He assured her of that, not adding that only the misfortune of stopping an Indian arrow in the interim could keep him away. Judith Carfax, with no effort on her part, was charming the tall Texan into a state of prospective bliss which interludes of work and adventure could not eradicate. He was no purposeless rover, as the girl presently divined.

"Did you leave Texas to trail Kilgore, because of that poor girl?" Judith asked softly. "Was she—your sweetheart?"

"No," said Lanny. "I didn't even know her very well. I wasn't specially huntin' Kilgore, though I'll run him down yet. It was the railroad called me north. I wanted to help build it and, when the job's done, I'll have my stake to go back to Texas; buy up cattle cheap and trail 'em north. Maybe I'll settle on the Weepin' Water. It's fine country for cows, I've heard, more grass and water than in the Southwest, though the winters are tough on cattle.

"Some day the longhorns will follow the buffalo out and we'll have a better grade of cattle, runnin' more to beef and less to horns and legs. I hope to see that day, with my brand on fifty thousand head. And every time I ship a herd I'll look at those rails runnin' east and west, and feel mighty satisfied I helped a little to lay 'em. It's a dream that's comin' true, Judith!"

She could not reply at once, for a lump was in her throat, tears in her eyes, inspired by the magnificent venture his simple words conjured up. Beside her, she realized, sat one of the empire builders of the raw and mighty West, dressed in buckskin, whose name would live long after his flesh had returned to earth.

"Wonderful!" She drew a slow, sighing breath.

He canted his head on one side, removing his eyes from the horses pounding on along the wide road.

"Yes," he said, "a lot of folks used to think it was a fool idea that steel rails could connect the two ends of the continent. Some still figure we won't finish."

Judith did not explain it was his own splendid vision and rugged in-

dependence which had forced her utterance.

The lights of Rock Springs station stared unwinkingly through the night, and Lanny sent the four-in-hand scampering into the settlement with popping whip. Hostlers sprang to unhitch. Questions were fired at them anent the long delay as Lanny handed the girl to the ground. When the driver's death and the condition of living passengers were told, the Overland station master called all hands to duty.

"That's a promise!" she replied and withdrew her hand through the window, her fingers numb from his unconsciously fervent grip.

He was back in the railroad camp well before daybreak. Buffalo wagons and troopers had long preceded him, and Major Pladwell, he learned, had ordered a squad of soldiers to camp at the trading post, to watch for Stack Kilgore's return. The clerk, Barney, had been sternly questioned, but obviously had no knowledge of his employer's traitorous conduct.

Lanny, Judith and the two badly shaken Easterners relieved cramped muscles and made tracks for the dining cabin. Shadler was hungry enough to eat fried boot leather, but he saw to it that his buffalo runner was provided for first. The stage, with a new driver and fresh four-in-hand, would travel on west that night, and the plainsman intended to make his own return journey, in the opposite direction, after a brief rest. By riding at night he was less likely to run foul of the Ogallalas again, though it would have thoroughly suited him to encounter Kilgore.

"I'll meet you on the Weepin' Water," Lanny said, when he closed the stage door behind Judith.

He merely knew that Kilgore had visited Lame Wolf's village on the Broadwater the night previous, and returned only briefly to the post.

Word of the raid incited by Stack had been spread by Sandburr Beeson in "canvas town," the tented recreation center of road hands and soldiers not on picket duty. Whisky mixed with rancor toward the renegade resulted in an uprising of the hotheads. Old Sandburr was in the van of the mob which rolled out of camp. Defying the grinning squad with pick handles and sledge hammers, he chased Barney out of the post and slopped kerosene around to make destruction certain.

The sergeant had been ordered to

arrest Kilgore, not to protect his property, and took comfort in the omission. No renegade had property rights, anyhow, in the grizzled trooper's opinion. And Lanny Shadler, object of Kilgore's hatred, was favorite with soldier and laborer. It wasn't because Kilgore hadn't tried that Lanny had not lost his hair to the Sioux.

And so the trading post was gutted in the early morning hours, the vengeful road hands scattering only when reinforcements galloped up-river, led by Major Pladwell in person. But it was too late to save the post and by the first streak of dawn nothing but the stockade remained standing.

Lanny Shadler, called from his blankets by the mob sounds, had squatted on a keg of spikes beside the right of way. As he watched the flames leap high and higher, he flung a question into the dark.

"What'll Stack do now? I'm doubtin' he'd 'a' come back at all, but now there's nothin' to draw him. If he had some cattle, I'd lay a bet he would try to cut in somehow on the beef contract. There's big money in that, as Stack knows, and he's always lookin' to the main chance."

CHAPTER VI

The Die-Hard Breed

FROM far out on the plains, Stack Kilgore himself had gazed upon that lurid conflagration as he returned with the defeated Ogallalas and their slain to the village on Broadwater Creek. And Kilgore knew what the fire-shot smoke clouds belching skyward signified—he was definitely outlawed and henceforth must ride with men of a different race.

He had already questioned the wisdom of venturing within reach of the cavalry and now he had his answer, written in flame. Yet his anger at the loss roweled him but briefly. He had a bigger stake to play for, and the death of Lame Wolf must vastly increase his sway over Burnt Thigh and the younger men of the band.

When the death-burdened ponies sent bereaved families into paroxysms of mourning, the renegade Texan spread his blankets on a hillside where the din of lamentation could least disturb his slumber. It made no difference how many Sioux passed to the spirit world, so long as Kilgore's interests were served. Lanny Shadler seemed to be under special protection of the war gods—at least the cavalry were too handy at answering smoke signals for Kilgore to repeat a raid like yesterday's when Lanny followed the buffalo again.

As the renegade calculated it, there was nearly a month in which to compass his enemy's death and arrange to provide the U. T. & E. with beef cattle. No time was to be lost, however, and the following morning, at a council fire, Kilgore urged the need of riding immediately for the Weeping Water country.

Still in Indian toggery, he headed west with Burnt Thigh and the fighting men. And when Lanny Shadler, on a scout from the railroad camp, found the Broadwater village, he saw nothing but old men, women and children there. The plainsman had hoped to discover Kilgore with his allies and perhaps capture or shoot him at long range. One did not stop to consider the method particularly when setting forth to kill a mad wolf. And Kilgore was little better, if any, in Lanny's estimation.

Covertly gazing on the village, the buffalo hunter was not long in doubt as to what had occurred. In the saddle once more, he cut the trail of the fighting men trending westward. He knew, from what he had observed from cover, that the village intended following at leisure.

"It's a war party Kilgore is with," Shadler reported later to Major Pladwell. "But what's he aimin' for? A raid on gradin' camps or what?"

But no call for help was telegraphed down the line that day or the next. A week went by and still no news that Kilgore and his Ogallalas had struck at any isolated camp or stage station or interrupted the daily journeys of east- and westbound coaches.

The day came when Lanny shot his last buffalo; when saloon men and gamblers folded their tents and packed paraphernalia on the flat cars. The big cavalry horses drummed up loading boards into box car interiors, while the "yellow-legs" themselves boarded flats, stacking their rifles down the middle and squatting on the sandbags used for shelter in fighting Indians from the moving train.

IN the beginning, the Sioux had attacked every time the trains moved from one base to another, as the wood-burning locomotives could not attain a rate of speed very much greater than that of their fleetest ponies, for short runs. But the redmen had always been beaten off with considerable loss to themselves, outdistanced by the rattling cars.

The soldiers weren't expecting much trouble until they reached the new end of track, ninety miles out. Here the Northern Cheyennes would be encountered in large numbers, if rumors of the tribe's frequent signal fires and council gatherings were true. Cheyennes and Sioux were allies, fought well together, and for Troops C and D of the Second Cavalry there was a prospect of brisk times ahead.

The high-pocketed Shadler, pipe in teeth, sat among the soldiers in a forward car as the construction train rolled out in the late afternoon, followed soon after by the boarding train with its crowd of workmen. Lanny was keen to arrive at their new destination, for two things drew him powerfully—that beef contract and the thought of renewing acquaintance with Judith Carfax.

Since Stack Kilgore and his Ogallalas had not been heard from after leaving the vicinity of the Broadwater, the plainsman was suspicious that his enemy planned to steal beef and sell it to the railroad. With the aid of the Indians, enough cattle might be driven off from the Weeping Water herds for their purpose. But neither Stack nor the Indians could even faintly hope to do business with the commissary department.

That was the main hitch, as far as Lanny could see. Some white man of Kilgore's caliber would have to represent him, but it was said his rustling gang had been cleaned up, except for Stack himself.

If that was the scheme—and Lanny couldn't be sure, hence did not bother to impart his suspicion to Dan Heeley—any agent of Kilgore's would be out of luck, for the plainsman intended riding north to the Fiddleback ranch as soon as the horses were unloaded. Between dawn and dark he should have closed a deal with Jethro Carfax, Judith's father, for the railhead camp would be situated but little more than twenty miles from the Fiddleback outfit according to the girl's instructions for reaching it.

Had he known what steps were being taken to despoil him of that contract, Lanny might not have lazed comfortably on a sand-sack. His pipe smoke sucked upward by the hot wind. His half-lidded eyes were pinned to the mountainous vista of brown plains, where nothing moved except stragglers from a buffalo herd. Not a war-bonnet showed on the skyline. The chances were, however, hostile eyes gazed form afar at the snorting Iron Horse, invading territory once claimed by the Sioux as homeland and hunting ground.

The country south of the Platte, including the Santa Fe Trail and western Kansas was, by agreement of the tribes, legitimate raiding and hunting domain of the Southern Cheyennes. Arapahoes, Kiowas and Comanches. But the men of the Second

took their ease with forage caps tipped over eyes; they didn't anticipate a swoop of raiders. A single war-whoop would galvanize them into action. Seizing rifles, they would flop behind sandbag bulwarks, ready to aim and fire at command.

NEXT morning, when Lanny on his buffalo runner started up Lodge Pole Creek, a branch of the Weeping Water, a score of Ogallalas in war paint were waiting in the hills beyond. These northerly hills abutted on the southern range boundaries of Jethro Carfax and his neighbors. Since dawn, when the smoke of the U. T. & E. locomotives drifted up the wide Platte Valley, Kilgore and Burnt Thigh had commanded long-range view of the arriving trains from a grassy summit.

The road through the Lodge Pole Hills was the shortest trail to Fiddleback ranch. Stack Kilgore, with more than four hundred stolen cattle practically ready for sale to the railroad commissary, had chosen this isolated spot to destroy the one man who stood between him and success.

It was no trick of mental legerdemain for Kilgore to conclude that Shadler and the daughter of the cowman who had hanged his brothers, would touch upon the topic uppermost in Lanny's mind, the beef contract, in their conversation following the stage coach attack. And it stood to reason that Judith would suggest Shadler's visiting the Fiddleback, to talk business, soon after he arrived in the Weeping Water country.

Hence, Kilgore lay in wait with a force sufficient to deal death to one man or a dozen, the rest of Burnt Thigh's party being off on another cattle raid. It was reasonable to suppose that Shadler would not tarry at camp, but set forth almost at once, for the commissary would not have much left-over buffalo meat from his last hunt.

But even sooner than Kilgore had hoped for, the speck of a rider crossed the first ridge north of the U. T. & E. camp and swung along the creek, hillsward bound. The renegade flicked out his long telescope, steadied it on the rider awhile in silence, then closed the instrument with a gesture of elation.

"It's the white man we want, Burnt Thigh!" he said in Ogallala to the sharp-faced chief, and began sliding backward down the hill. "Have the warriors get ready, being careful not to warn him, for he is wary of traps like the timber wolf. Once he is dead, the Iron Horse people will take our whoa-haws and Burnt Thigh shall have money to buy the finest guns made and plenty cartridges."

The young chief grunted, sprang from the foot of the hill into the half-circle of warriors squatting on the leeward side, feathered lances in hand and holding the jaw-ropes of their lean ponies. Burnt Thigh spoke with dark eyes aflame.

"Do not kill the white man, but wound him, so that, like the buffalo pierced by an arrow, he cannot get away. It is better that he die slowly, with fiery splinters in his flesh, burning brush at his head and feet. Remember our brothers that this white man has killed!"

Kilgore held his peace, knowing just how far he might go and retain the whip-hand. He wasn't above torturing Shadler himself, but too much was at stake to take chances on the slippery plainsman escaping a second time. Whether the warriors aimed to kill or disable, Stack intended shooting straight when he had Lanny focused on the business end of his rifle.

THE hoofbeats of the lone horseman set up a dull drumming in a gully bottom, a hundred yards south of the deadly quiet war party. Lanny had cut no sign of hostiles in the neighborhood, and it was still a question in his mind whether Kilgore had come this far west. But vigilance was the price of keeping one's hair. He

knew that Cheyennes if not Sioux were gathered to dispute the passage of the Iron Horse. And somehow the very silence of the hills was an unvoiced threat.

That silence broke to the pealing war cry, as Lanny passed a flat-topped hill. And when the trail behind filled suddenly with red pony riders, Lanny stretched along his mount's neck and hung in the spurs. They were almost on top of him, and with a swift backward glance he measured his chances of outriding the band. Not one in a thousand!

But he was of the die-hard breed, and when he spied Kilgore and the young chief with the headdress of buffalo horns, Shadler's lips parted in a soundless snarl. Here was proof of his suspicion. Kilgore had sprung this trap to decide which of the two should get that beef contract! Come hell or high water, it wouldn't be Stack!

The renegade's rifle butt fitted the curve of his shoulder. The muzzle was stringy with the smoke of his first shot, which had been a clean miss when the plainsman crouched forward. Bowstrings unshipped arrows in humming flight. Lanny winced as an arrowhead struck across his thigh, slitting buckskin breeches and the flesh beneath. But his sun-puckered eyes were scanning the gently rising slopes of the hill. He reined his horse along the base of it, as Kilgore's rifle spoke again, and in another moment swept out of sight of his enemies around the wide bend.

Again he tugged, and flying hoofs scattered fragments of talus as the buffalo runner charged the hill-slope, aiming for the flat top. The pitch of the hillside was not too steep for even a plains-trained horse, and Lanny's mount was grabbing ground in short leaps upward when the Ogallalas streamed into view and started climbing.

Kilgore's rifle roared, cutting fringe from Lanny's shoulder. The plainsman bounced out of the saddle and raced to a boulder embedded in the hillside, snatching forth his Colts. He crouched low, resting his wrists on the hot rock, and opened fire.

Squeezing trigger of left-hand gun and right alternately, he lifted his rebel yell as Kilgore lurched. The renegade's rifle dropped and he slung one hand to opposite shoulder. His climbing horse turned end for end, making toward the bottom of the hill. Lanny's elation died; by the way Kilgore rode he wasn't much hurt.

The Indians, for the moment, appeared not to have noticed his desertion. Their ponies lunged up and up, lean but muscular arms bent and let drive a flight of feathered shafts. But the uphill riding caused the arrows to speed too high or too low, and the plainsman knelt unscathed, lashing lead with a surer hand as the range shortened.

Burnt Thigh bounced a rifle ball off Shadler's refuge rock, then wheeled his pony broadside and down the hill again, calling his braves after him. Stricken ponies and stricken warriors attested to the lethal reach of those belching Colts. Burnt Thigh's wind-buffeted yell was scarcely needed to send those who could dashing pell-mell for the toe of the slope.

Lanny tilted up smoking six-shooters when the drag-end riders had put sixty yards between them and his stand. At more than sixty yards, his .44's were not certain to kill, and he wasn't in a position to throw shots away. Too bad that his Springfield rifle was on his saddle, but it was just the gun for shooting from the hilltop. As the Sioux retreated, he darted from cover, quartering across to seize the reins of his horse and continue flight toward the crest.

He observed the sun-bleached dryness of the grass, debated the question of firing it on the chance that it would be seen at the U. T. & E. camp and correctly interpreted—the

railroad was less than ten miles distant. But the country no longer was flat. The Lodge Pole Hills intervened, and even though the brittle grass made smoke enough to catch a picket's eye, it might be attributed to roving Cheyennes. Not anticipating a fight on the road to the Fiddleback, Lanny hadn't advised his soldier friends to be particularly on the lookout.

"But the odds ain't so much," he told himself, pleased with what he found on the summit, a shallow, grass-fringed depression in which he and his horse could lie down. "If I had old Sandburr to help me watch all sides at once, I'd begin to feel Kilgore's head was in the sack. Got to work it anyhow, on my high lonesome!"

HE rapped his mount's knees with his quirt handle and the buffalo runner dropped on its side with a long sigh. Shadler reloaded his pistols, unslung his rifle and peered through the grass lining the depression. The sun scorched his back, thirst soon became insistent. He glided on hands and knees to his horse, briefly tipping the army canteen slung to his saddle. He had brought no food, expecting to sample Judith Carfax's cookery at the end of his ride, but he could manage as long as he had water.

Shadler wiped sweat from his eyes as it dripped off his forehead and suddenly poked the Springfield's polished barrel downward as a young Sioux tore alone up the slope. He thought at first it was some reckless youngster's show of bravado. And partly it was that, but the brave had an object in making his solo charge—to retrieve the rifle of Kilgore, a better weapon than the trade muskets the Indians carried. As moccasined heels drubbed the flanks of his wild-eyed mount, the young Ogallala brandished his lance and defied white man's gun lightning to strike him.

The plainsman took aim as the uphill rider neared the fallen Springfield, but his finger did not cramp the trigger. He admired the youthful warrior's spunk. Too bad that Kilgore hadn't the guts to come after the weapon himself. Then there would have been no hesitating on Lanny's part. But he intended keeping that long-range shooting-iron out of the renegade's hands. Forced to depend on his six-shooter, Stack might be lured to closer range, though Lanny wasn't betting much on that.

"I'll make you look foolish, youngster," he muttered, cheek rubbing rifle stock, his finger exerting slow pressure, "though maybe I'm the fool for not beadin' you now, instead of later. Here's at you!"

The Springfield thundered leaden answer to the young Ogallala's challenge. He was a dozen yards from Kilgore's gun, half hidden in the grass, when the heavy slug blotted out the star on his pony's forehead. The epithets he had been hurling were stilled by the sudden uprearing of his mount.

It went over backward, sliding downhill in a cloud of dust, from which the figure of the rider presently emerged, bounding toward the toe of the slope. He had lost his lance, but did not stop to recover it. Shadler heard the high-pitched banter of the waiting warriors as the crestfallen youth returned.

Shadler shoved up on his elbows. "Hey, Kilgore! You tied to the ground? Slip a knife in your hide anywhere and you'd spill yellow! Come up and get your gun. In person!"

"I'm runnin' the show, Shadler," came the bull-voiced answer. "I'll live to see you staked out naked and to smell your flesh burnin' like the hide of a branded cow critter!"

"Yeh—you'd out-Injun the Injuns, you varmint!" Lanny yelled back. In a spasm of anger he threw a shot at the distant group, though he had small hope of hitting the mark. But

he came so near to chipping Kilgore as his bullet ricocheted from a trail-side boulder that the party moved farther out of range.

Ensued a long, scorching wait, and it was apparent to Lanny that Kilgore was having difficulty in securing agreement to some plan of attack. But at length Burnt Thigh sprang astride his pony, and the braves drew up in a long file behind him. Kilgore, favoring his right shoulder, palmed long-barreled Colt with his left as he forked a spotted pony. Dust spurted, and they raced around the foot of the hill, just beyond rifle range.

CHAPTER VII

Fire Arrows

LANNY knew what next to expect. That wheel of flying horsemen would split into parties of three or more and charge the summit upon every side at once. Swarming at him from every direction, it was calculated that the plainsman, though he killed several, would shortly be a prisoner ripe for torture or yield his scalp. But to Shadler's advantage was the fact that he could keep sheltered and work a dropfire while his foes must gallop uphill, not across level ground. And shooting under such conditions was prone to be off-center.

His rifle and Colt .44's were primed for "buck Injun." Lanny's jaw was sternly set, when Burnt Thigh screeched a signal. Four riders broke from the circle and whirled head-on toward the hillcrest. It was nearly a three-hundred-yard shot to the bottom, and Lanny wasn't waiting for closer range. He must discourage the four as swiftly as he could, then shift his stand to repel the charge of others. To the shrill yells of chilling menace his ears were closed. His smoking rifle lifted and flung the foremost Ogallala from his saddle pad.

For maximum speed in reloading, Lanny had two shells between his teeth and three others hooked in the fingers of his left hand. He unseated another rider, though the brave was not killed and crawled away, and the horse of a third chinned the slant and went sliding down. The rider sprang off, retreating in an avalanche of small stones. The fourth turned back as a buliet cut his tossing feathers.

Hardly waiting to see the last rider turn, Lanny swung left and plunged to his knees at a spot overlooking the south slope. A band of five had covered a hundred yards of uphill going. But ponies and riders began to dot the sear and yellow grass of the slope when the Springfield spewed flaming lead among them. The plainsman was a killing-machine, loading, firing, with almost unbelievable speed. It ended in a rout. Shadler added his own wild yell to the ululations of the savages, hurtled to a new position and saw through smoke-stinging eyes two climbing lines of feather-decked foes.

The party on the east side was the nearer, in pistol range, and he tossed the Springfield aside to give them two-handed hell. War arrows swarmed upward, some overshooting the mark, several stabbing into the grass on the rim of the depression. And one of these pinned his fringed sleeve to earth. He yanked it free, continuing to fire, and though Burnt Thigh himself, with fanatical courage, led the attack, he lost heart when a pistol ball passed through the fleshy part of his thigh. Two of the warriors with him had pitched headlong, and he retired, the rest wheeling after and hooting dismally.

Dashing the sweat from his eyes, Shadler lunged a few feet to face the north. He emptied the last shots in his Colts into the curving line of five riders who had not yet felt the bite of his bullets, but showed a sudden disinclination to finish the uphill charge. Kilgore impinged on

Lanny's vision. The renegade hung on the withers of his horse and his six-shooter slugs plowed up gouts of dust a few feet below the depression.

Lanny ignored the retreating Indians to concentrate on his white enemy. He scored, for Kilgore yelped in pain. But he stuck burr-like to his mount and the slithering hoofs hurled a powdery film over both.

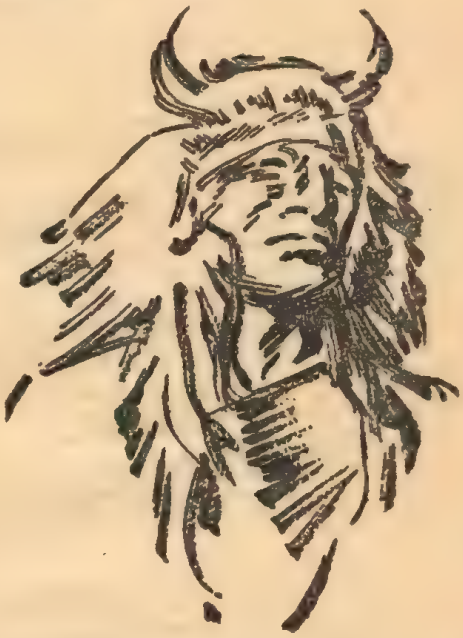
SHADLER'S Colts were empty. He let them slide and frenziedly reloaded his Springfield, quitting the depression to notch his sights of the quirting renegade, hard to see in the rolling yellow fog and welded to pony-back. But the horse jumped at the rifle's crash, then tore quartering across the slope, to fall dead at the foot of the hill. Lanny had whipped in another shot, but so far as he could tell it had done no damage.

Crouching out of cover, he waited with rifle focused on the dead pony as Kilgore disentangled himself, keeping head and shoulders down. He knew Shadler was waiting. But, since he was obliged to expose his body briefly to reach better cover, the Springfield whanged the instant he appeared, zigzagging across the trail. The renegade fell flat, then rolled swiftly behind a boulder. His taunting yell seemed to abide with the renegade.

He crawled back to the depression, reloaded all around, then hunkered down, breathing hard from his tremendous effort. Sweat soaked through his buckskins in wide, dark patches. But he had cleared the hill. What next? If it were not for Kilgore, with his special ax to grind, possibly the Indians would now be willing to leave him in possession of the hill.

With the cavalry at no great distance, it seemed improbable they would set up an all-day siege, though doubtless it was suspected he had no stock of food, only a canteen of water. Whatever happened—a last ride to take him or withdrawal from the field—would happen before nightfall, for the plains tribes shunned fighting after dark whenever it was possible.

The sun swung westward. Lanny gave his horse a drink of the tepid canteen water poured in his hat, took a swallow himself. Then he glanced over the rim of the depression at the sound of an arrowhead striking stone. He gazed with suddenly dilated eyes at the flaming shaft a hundred yards from his covert. Other fire arrows fell above and below the first one, even as he looked, and he felt a tingling thrill along his spine when he observed how the yellow grass exploded into flame.



"Burns like tinder, not much smoke," he thought, mastering the gone feeling at the pit of his stomach. "Hardly a chance of help from the camp. They aim to hedge me with fire on all sides, and the wind's up."

No use in lighting a back-fire, to burn out an area over which the flames could not leap, for a fresh flight of arrows alighted high up near the summit. Those arrows could reach anywhere, even the bottom of his shallow trench. They were gliding into the air and down from all compass points. Already a saffron smoke screen was obstructing his view of

crouching Ogallalas, but it didn't interfere with his hearing their cries of savage gloating.

They had him. Either he must perish in inferno on the hilltop or race down over scorching ground to meet their bullets and arrows in the open.

HE understood now why warriors had risked his rifle-fire for the past hour to drag the bodies of the slain downhill. He had been sparing of his shots, not certain but that recovery of the dead was preliminary to retirement from the battle scene.

Lanny wondered a trifle that the leaders of the war party hadn't tried the fire method before so many braves had fallen. He decided that it was fear of attracting soldiers from the railroad camp. But there wasn't smoke enough to lift in warning over the higher hills of the Lodge Pole range, and the moment came when mounting flame and insufferable heat forced the plainsman to make grim choice.

His horse was on its feet, snorting and rolling wild eyes. Only Shadler's hand on the bridle kept the animal standing there.

"Looks like the last call, pard," Lanny said with as much feeling as though speaking to a human comrade. "Goin' to be hell on your hoofs, but—it's not more'n three hundred yards and all downhill! Five minutes longer and our hides'll smoke."

He leaped to the saddle in a sudden frenzy of decision. If he had to die—and he was sure of it—he'd make a ride that the Ogallalas would tell about around their campfires for a generation! His spurs raked cruelly and the rearing horse came down with its forehoofs over the edge of the depression, dashed on toward the coiling, fire-hot smoke.

The horse screamed at the touch of reaching flame fingers, its sideward leap jolting the figure clinging to its back, with handkerchief bound across nose and mouth, hat pulled low. Lanny's eyebrows vanished, his long hair curled and crisped, his buckskins smoked. Yet he clung to saddle and to rifle, riding blindly, a hellish roaring and hissing in his ears.

His tortured horse flung scorched hoofs high, for after they had bolted through a field of flame and gained the burnt-over lower slopes, the smoldering, blackened earth burned the animal's feet. Dimly Lanny was aware of leaping, demoniacal figures in the lower background. He was catapulting through heated space. Lighting suddenly on hands and knees, he rose up with a snort of pain as bare flesh and buckskin-clad knees were seared by contact with the hot ground. His horse was gone, its agonized screaming stilled by bullet or arrow from below. It had been shot from under him.

Not for a moment did the plainsman stand still. The thin soles of his cowboy boots were no protection from the ovenlike earth of the hillside. He raced madly on, shooting his rifle as it swung in his hand. An Indian screeched and began a death chant. It was a hit by accident, because the overconfident brave had got in his path, for Lanny Shadler was too tortured to be sure of anything except a mad desire to reach cool ground.

His boots were burned through as he flung toward the talus at the hill base. Trade gun and six-shooter exploded near at hand, a numbing blow on the side of his head, another on the shoulder, ripped away all sense of feeling. He seemed to pitch into a black void, with the hated voice of Stack Kilgore bellowing a paean of triumph.

He did not hear the sudden crash of guns behind the jubilating renegade and Indians. A brave, running with extended coup-stick to slap his body as it rolled among the rock fragments, bounded high and fell limply. Sombreroed and booted riders, wielding rifles and six-shooters, caught the war party on the flank, and Kilgore was the first to turn in

flight. Burnt Thigh limped at his heels, and brave after brave flitted through the haze of dust and powdersmoke to spring to saddle pad. High-keyed cowboy yells answered the wild war cry of the fleeing Indians. Lance-heads flashed, but the Ogallalas did not stand ground.

"They're breakin'!" boomed a white man's voice, his shout just barely audible above hoof and gun thunder.

IN a huddle of racing forms, the Indians pounded westward, with hawk-faced, lean-bodied range riders pursuing to the edge of the hills. The popping of firearms dropped off gradually as shooting-irons were emptied.

"Far enough!" yelled the authoritative voice, and the speaker, a burly, white-haired cowman, checked his plunging roan. "Let's go back and see what they've left of that white man, the devils! Where's Jude?"

Jethro Carfax, transplanted Texan, caught sight of his daughter as he wheeled his roan to ride back. He had told her to keep off the firing line when he and the Fiddleback stock hands, discovering the plight of that lone white man, had charged in.

Judith had obeyed, but the instant the smoke cleared and she glimpsed that familiar figure in smudged buckskin lying face upward in the talus, the range girl spurred her horse to Lanny's side. She was kneeling, supporting his lolling head and waving one hand frantically, when Jethro's swiveling gaze located her. The cowman quickened the gait of his mount.

"Who is it?" His tone was gruff, but his steely eyes kindly. "Not that hombre you was expectin' from the railroad?"

"Yes, it's Lanny—half dead!" Her voice trembled and her eyes were tragic, signs of which Jethro made mental note, for she was accustomed to death and disaster, living on the untamed frontier, and usually was as calm as one of his hard-bitten cowboys.

"Well, now, if his heart's pumpin' we can maybe pull him through." The big cattleman slid out of the saddle and gravel crunched under his boots as he bowlegged to the girl's side. "H'm-m. Looks used up!" He scrubbed bristly blunt chin, eyeing the scorched and powder-stained face of the silent plainsman. "Take off his hat, sis. Pistol ball dug a nasty furrow there on his head, and his left shoulder as well, but I don't believe it cracked the bone. Some bad burns from chargin' through that fire. They sure had him in a tight!

"But don't worry, Jude. I've doctored many a dyin' man and brought him to life, simply because no better doc was handy. Here, boys, couple of you rig a blanket sling between two broncs and tote this hombre careful. He's a brother Tehano, so Jude says."

The dozen or more Fiddleback cowpunchers, several needing a little first aid attention after the brush with the Sioux, had walked their horses to the hill, and the boss's order was quickly complied with. The grass fire had nearly burned itself out. Flame was hissing through the depression which Lanny had vacated to make his desperate ride.

"What about the cattle, Jeth?" the gaunt but steel-fibered Jim Pender, Fiddleback ramrod, asked.

"We'll give up lookin' any more today," replied Carfax, hoisting a leg across saddle. "Be sundown before we rode much farther and this friend of Jude's needs lookin' after. Reckon I can do as well as the army surgeon, down at the camp. If not, we'll send for him. This long-geared hombre saved Jude, time of the stage coach attack, and we owe him somethin' for that. Besides, he was comin' to talk beef contract."

Settled in the leather, the white-haired cowman scanned the scene with eagle eyes. "Sure, he's a fighter, that lad! Evidence of it everywhere. Say, Jim, d'you reckon the lower slope's cooled enough to fetch his rig-

gin' off that dead horse? And there's his rifle yonder."

"You're pretty certain he's going to need those things again, aren't you, Dad?" Judith took hope from her father's words.

"Sure, honeybug." He leaned to pat her shoulder. "All Texans are tough!"

BUT Jethro began to have doubts that his rough and ready surgery was sufficient to pull Lanny back from the Valley of the Shadow, when evening of the second day found the plainsman still lying in a state of coma.

He had the big four-poster in the spare room at Fiddleback ranch, and Judith had scarcely left his side. With his burns swathed in cooling bandages and his wounds carefully dressed, there seemed to be no reason why he shouldn't have regained consciousness. His temperature was normal, though at first it had risen and he had muttered about fighting Kilgore to a finish. That name on his lips had aroused Jethro and his daughter, watching at the plainsman's bedside.

"Hell, is that renegade hereabouts again?" the old cowman had exploded, a flush of anger creeping up his seamy neck and face. "I didn't spot him with them Ogallalas, did you, sis?"

Judith hadn't, but she reminded her father that Kilgore had been garbed like one of his Indian friends, even to war bonnet, when she encountered him on the Platte. It was reasonable to suppose he still affected Sioux toggery.

This evening, when Lanny's life spark seemed burning low, Jethro jammed on his black sombrero and stalked to the door, saying over his shoulder, "Maybe we've waited too long, hopin', but I'll get that army sawbones here if it takes all night."

White-lipped, bent over the patient, Judith glanced up. "I guess you'd better. I don't understand— Oh, Dad, wait! He's opened his eyes! Lanny—how do you feel?"

He recognized her, that was plain, and his voice was fairly strong, reassuringly so. "Why, tol'able, Judith. But how'd I get here? Where's that damn Kilgore and his Sioux outfit? They had me boxed—"

Jethro Carfax sauntered back to the bed, hat in hand. He was smiling, a smile which seemed to reach from ear to ear. He knew the signs when a man was going to get well, and Lanny had all of 'em right now. Weak, of course, but on the mend.

"You had us fightin' our heads, lad, because you wouldn't wake up," he chuckled.

Tears of joy fell on the patient's wrist, above bandaged hand, as Judith leaned over to smooth back a tawny forelock. Lanny quickly shifted his glance to her sun-tanned face.

"Now, what's that for?" he demanded.

"Don't scold, Lanny," she gulped. "You've been lying here nearly two whole days, and—and—"

"Son," broke in the cowman, "I'm her dad—Jeth Carfax—and you can feel yourself a heap flattered. She's been more upset since we picked you up at the bottom of that hill than I've seen her since her maw died back in Texas. Oh, Jude's always tenderhearted enough, but you learn to keep it under cover when you're ranchin' on the frontier. If you'll take an old campaigner's advice, you'll try to sleep now till mornin'. Then we can wau-wau."

Lanny had to admit he was very weary. There was something important he wanted to tell Carfax, but his mind was too tired to figure it out. Morning would do, he supposed. His last look was at the face of Judith, her eyes unutterably tender as she placed a cool hand on his forehead. He turned his cheek on the pillow and the sound of his regular, deep breathing came to ears no longer strained in anxious listening.

CHAPTER VIII

Wolf Outfit

BOLSTERED up in bed, Lanny Shadler gripped the patchwork quilt with bandaged hands as he faced Jethro Carfax and the Fiddleback foreman, Jim Pender. Morning sunlight filled the room, the chintz window curtains, handiwork of Judith, flapped lazily in the warm, dry wind. The girl herself, attired in a pale blue hoopskirt, sat near a window, fingers tensely clasped in her lap. Her eyes shone brightly with excitement, for, better even than her father and Jim Pender, she understood what it would mean to Lanny if he lost that beef contract.

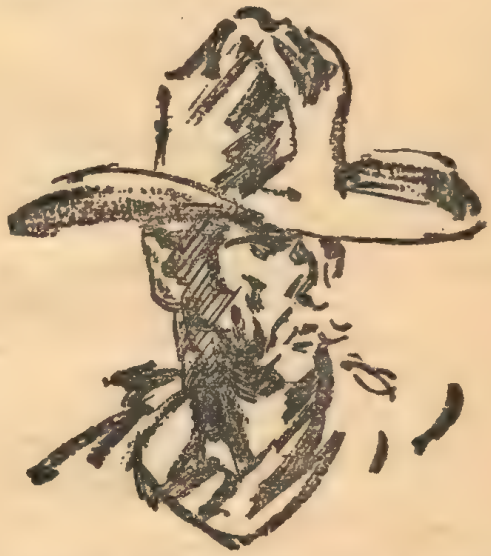
"You can be pretty sure, Mr. Carfax," said the plainsman, "that Kilgore and Burnt Thigh's Sioux are the ones who've been drivin' off yours and your neighbors' cattle for the past few weeks. What else would that renegade be doin' in the country after two years' absence? No doubt a-tall he was watchin' the Lodge Pole road to stop me from gettin' here."

Carfax puffed vigorously on his briar and spoke around the stem. "It has that look. We cattlemen were 'way off in our reckonin'. When the raidin' started we figured that, because of a concentration of Cheyennes and Sioux in this section to hamper the railroad builders, and because there's no buffalo this far west, the Injuns were stealin' stock for their own use, intendin' at the same time to keep the road gangs from eatin' beef. But what you say, and the fact that hellion Kilgore is back in the neighborhood, puts a different face on the matter.

"Dammit, Kilgore's got nine lives, all of 'em worthless! I was chief of vigilantes when we corraled his gang, and Stack was the only man to escape so far as I know. But Jude's told you that."

The dull red of anger glowed in Lanny's one exposed cheek—the other side of his face, badly burned, was covered with gauze. "Well, Stack would need some dependable man to act as go-between. He couldn't ride up himself and offer Dan Heeley cheap beef. What I'm worryin' about is that we may be too late.

"Dan had buffalo meat to last him maybe a week and expected me back at sundown, two days ago. Time enough in between for Kilgore's agent to make Dan a proposition. And if 'twas the right price, you bet Dan would sign a contract without waitin' for me. It was to go to the lowest bidder."



Carfax tucked pipe in buckskin vest pocket and arose, picking up his wide-brimmed hat. "I can see where your talk is leadin', Lanny, and I'll wear down a bronc gettin' to the railroad camp pronto. Too bad I didn't know what the situation was a little sooner. Dan Heeley's the man I talk to, eh? I've got a thousand steers right now I'll sell him mighty cheap. *Adios*, and keep yourself quiet. You won't be ridin' for several days yet, and not so soon if you spin off the handle. Any messages?"

It was the hardest day, in some ways, that Lanny Shadler had ever experienced. And when he heard the cattleman's weary horse shuffle into the yard, something in the sound of dragging hoofs caused the plainsman's last hope to take flight. He

caught Judith's eye as she got up from her seat by the window, smoothing out her apron, for she had but lately stepped in from the kitchen.

"It's probably all right, Lanny," she said encouragingly.

But when the dusty Carfax lumbered through the doorway of the sick room and sank into a hide-bottomed chair, one glance told them the story.

"Beat out by that dog-robber, Kilgore, or that's how I reckon it without a lick of proof to go by!" were Jethro's first words. "Sis, is supper on the table? I'm wolfish, but I want a few words with Lanny before I eat. I sure hate to take the shine out of his eyes—and yours. Plumb disappointed myself. But here's the lowdown on the deal."

Just yesterday, Carfax related, the boarding contractor had been approached by a man representing himself as a Texas drover, "Brazos" Dalton, lately settled northwest of the Weeping Water. Dalton had beef to sell—all the railroad could use while stretching track toward the Wyoming border. And Dan Heeley, believing that Lanny had been rubbed out by hostile Cheyennes or that he had failed to come to terms with the Fiddleback boss, readily scratched his name to a contract with Brazos Dalton.

HIS gaze intent on Lanny as he spoke, Carfax admired the stubborn thrust of the lean jaw. The plainsman wasn't accepting defeat, not for a minute.

"You can't hardly blame Heeley for jumpin' at a good chance," the cattleman rumbled on. "This Dalton—if that's his real name—made him a price I couldn't shave and realize even a small profit."

"Naturally," Lanny was tight-lipped. "Stolen beef don't cost the thief nothin'—it's all profit to him! Ever hear of Dalton before?"

"Nope. But—" Carfax slapped a leathery knee for emphasis—"I met him this afternoon! I dropped into one of them canvas-walled saloons and he was there, gettin' over a bender he'd been on since closin' the deal. If he's Kilgore's man, I bet you Stack is cussin' the delay. Well, this Texas hombre—I'll admit he talks like one—spotted me at the plank bar and he chirps:

" 'Seems to me we're sort of neighbors, though I been too busy to ride around and get acquainted. The drought beat me down on the Brazos and I trailed north with what critters I had left, throwin' down on Pine Ridge, north of you. That's near a month ago.'

"I told him I hadn't heard of any trail driver crossin' the range and it was a wonder the Cheyennes and Sioux hadn't gobbled up his herd.

" 'Skinned by 'em somehow,' Dalton told me, 'but we had a fracas farther south with the Comanches and Kioways. Was you after the beef contract? If so, you're a little mite late. I got it!' Sort of expected him to flap his wings, the way he got that out.

" 'You don't have to pile it on,' I says to him, my neck gettin' a little bowed. 'I knew you got it. A rooster mostly does a lot of crowin' over nothin'!"

"He seen I was pawin' dirt and bought me a drink pronto, which I accepted just to study him. Never seen him before in my life, but he's got the earmarks of knowin' the cattle business—maybe wet cattle. The kind of a fellow you wouldn't trust yourself with in a dark alley, sabe? He left camp before I did, but I stepped outside and seen him ridin' northwest, so I ain't doubtin' he's located on Pine Ridge, about ten mile from here.

"Up there was an abandoned ranch house, a corral and some sheds left by a man who sold out and went East several years ago. Now, with all his talk of us bein' neighbors, Mr. Brazos plumb forgot to tell me his latchstring was out to callers, and

I'd like a closer squint at his outfit. I'm havin' Jim gather the boys tomorrow—"

Here Lanny Shadler interrupted with outthrust hand. "Hold your horses, Mr. Carfax! I'll be ready to fork leather in a day or two—sure, sure I can! Anyway, a little wait can't make any difference now. But I'm the one who's ridin' to Pine Ridge, to look this outfit over. I'll have a detachment of yellow-legs along, and if things don't look on the square, or we catch Kilgore on the ground, that beef contract won't be worth the paper it's written on. Way I feel I could hop out of bed right now and head for trouble!"

"As if you hadn't mixed with plenty of it!" smiled Judith, leaning to pat his back. "Lanny, you sure stand up to the lick-log! They can't put you down to stay and you'll have that contract yet. I'm cheering for you."

"What'd you expect of a man from Texas!" chuckled Carfax, his own disappointment fading. "Not the kind of Tehano that Kilgore and Dalton are, I don't mean!"

"The thing for you to do meantime," said Shadler to the cattleman, "is keep a full force of cowhands on the range to guard against another Indian raid. I dunno how many cattle Kilgore's Sioux have run off, but they'll need a lot more—if Kilgore's the man backin' Brazos Dalton. You were huntin' cattle the day you found me, I reckon?"

"Just so," nodded Jethro, "and never found a single head of 'em. There's a stretch of badlands up toward Pine Ridge, where trails disappear. A Murphy freighter or a big Shuttler wagon wouldn't leave wheel tracks on that rock-ribbed ground. Stack's lost none of his cunnin'. 'Twas mighty slick of him to use Indians instead of white rustlers, so we cowmen wouldn't suspect what was really bein' done with the cattle. If Dalton's ranch ain't a holdout, then I don't know straight up. But you got to prove it to break that contract Heeley made!"

SOONER than Judith wanted him to go, but with wounds and burns healing nicely, Lanny Shadler, on a rangy sorrel presented to him by Jeth Carfax, departed from the hospitable Fiddleback. He deeply regretted the loss of his trained buffalo runner, which had saved his life more than once while he was hunting meat for the railroad.

Whether Kilgore believed him dead or not, Lanny gave the Lodge Pole Hills the ride-around on his return journey, striking southward across the brown plains. It was the longer but safer route to the U. T. & E. camp, suggested by Jeth Carfax, who had wanted to accompany him.

Of course the old cowman hadn't mentioned Shadler to the stranger, Brazos Dalton. But Carfax's presence in the railroad camp might have been regarded as proof that Lanny was alive. And though the plainsman's feud with the renegade must be settled by the death of one or the other, Shadler wasn't so foolish as to court repetition of the one-sided battle in which he had "hubbed hell by a hair."

But, without interruption, he dropped off his new horse in the midst of familiar confusion late that afternoon. Old Sandburr Beeson was pumping his arm next minute, wanting to know all that had happened. It was a heart-warming welcome he got, from road gangs and cavalrymen. When he could work his way to the boarding-train, Dan Heeley stepped off the rear platform of his office car looking a bit shamefaced.

"I reckon you think I'm a helluva fellow, Lanny," he greeted. "But we figured your scalp was mebbe danglin' at a hostile Cheyenne's belt, and this Dalton had beef at the right price."

"I'm not sore at you, Dan. Buck up!" Shadler shot out his hand.

"When does Brazos make his first delivery of cattle? Still two days' rations of buffalo meat, eh? Well, that'll give me time to do what I have to do. I don't suppose, now, you'd buy stolen beef—specially if Stack Kilgore was the thief."

Heeley reddened from the neck up and his eyes smoked. "What're you sayin', me boy? That old cowman, Carfax, told me it was Kilgore who jumped you in the hills and you had a close shave. But ain't you carryin' your grudge too far when you mix up that renegade in the cattle deal?"

Shadler laughed shortly, not a mirthful sound. "There's some things Jeth Carfax held back when he saw you. Let's go in your office and I'll piece it out."

The day was too far advanced to start for Dalton's ranch at Pine Ridge. But early the following morning, having interviewed Major Pladwell the night previous, Lanny Shadler, in new boots and buckskin, extra apparel from his warbag in the boarding train, rode out of camp beside Captain Billy Walbank. The Second Cavalry's guidon fluttered in the morning wind over the half-troop of forty men. They had crossed the tracks, forded the river, and headed north by west over the Overland stage trail, striking a road gait as the leagues of short grass unrolled before them.

It was a jaunt of thirty miles to Pine Ridge, and his friends at the Fiddleback had advised Lanny as to the best route. Forty men were none too many, considering that Kilgore, with all the survivors of Burnt Thigh's band, might be encountered at the ranch. Besides, the signal fires of Cheyennes had been seen during the night, no farther away than the Lodge Pole Hills.

Lanny rode some of the time leaning in the saddle, keen eyes scanning the pony tracks in ancient buffalo trails, trails in which grass had sprouted since the last great herd had wandered over the region. Similarly were the wagon tracks along the Platte, worn by the Conestogas bound for Oregon and California, becoming grass-grown in places. Big wagon trains were infrequent nowadays, would vanish when the Iron Horse, roaring west, had established a new and faster mode of travel.

"Reckon we'll have a brush with the Cheyennes before we strike Pine Ridge?" Captain Walbank wiped perspiring face with his neck-bandanna and squinted at the sign-reading plainsman.

"Don't believe it, cap." Shadler straightened, his gaze touching the far ridges. "But it'll pay to keep our eyes skinned. There's several hundred hostiles ridin' somewhere in these parts—seem to be makin' toward a common center. A big camp to hold a war council, likely. That's what the signal fires meant—callin' 'em together. But I figure they're not quite ready for attack. We're a pretty sizable chunk, and unless a big war party should get us in a covered spot, ain't much danger they'll try for a bite of us."

LATER on a ridge top, horsemen with tossing eagle feathers were espied. But it was open country all about and Shadler piloted the troop undeviatingly toward that ridge. He didn't believe those bronze figures were numerous enough to be planning interruption to Troop C's progress. If there was a big village, it must be hidden away in a fold of the hills many miles westward, for all pony tracks entering the old buffalo trails pointed in that direction.

Shadler's judgment proved correct, for when the column of blue-clad troopers ascended the ridge, the watching Cheyennes were whipping up dust in the west. The band had dropped down the far side of the ridge and ridden under the protection of its sage-tufted backbone while the cavalry approached from the south.

"But we'll hear from 'em, and plenty more like 'em, before another twenty-four hours," Lanny predicted. He shifted in the saddle, leveled a fringed arm eastward as the heavy hoofbeats of the cavalry mounts pounded the reverse slope of the ridge. "We've come about twenty miles. Yonder's Fiddleback ranch. Looks small from here, but it's a big outfit. There's a bunch of cattle, and there's another. Cowhands, too. They're herdin' 'em close these days."

"Good business," Captain Walbank remarked, "with so many hostiles on the drift, not counting Kilgore's Sioux. Well, ten miles to go, you said, and maybe hell at the end of the road. I reckon you didn't have such a tough time at the Fiddleback," he added slyly, "with Miss Carfax to nurse you. You free-lance scouts have all the luck! If I reported on sick list, I'd have to put up with a red-headed, cussin' orderly in the hospital tent."

Lanny swatted his Springfield, balanced athwart saddle horn since the Indians had been sighted on that ridge top.

"You can have your shoulder straps, cap'n," he chuckled, "and I'll stick to buckskin. That girl is a frontier angel!"

Pine Ridge reared its pine-timbered slopes before the searching gaze of Troop C's captain and guide in buckskin. Walbank halted on a rise while the column closed up. Shadler's eyes leaped from point to point of the dilapidated ranch buildings clustered below the ridge in the elbow bend of a creek. A mile or two beyond the log dwelling, on the flats, a haze of dust was being raised by cattle and cowboys. Apparently a roundup was in progress.

"Looks safe enough, Cap'n Billy," said Shadler, turning. "It would be like Kilgore, if he saw us comin', to fort up his Ogallalas in the house and sheds and rake us as we rode on in. But there's no pony herd, and plains Indians don't travel afoot."

THE captain swung his arm and the troop broke into a trot, accoutrements jingling. They were past the open gateway in the broken-down fence enclosing the ranch yard when a long-coupled man in buckskin jumper and wide-winged chaps emerged from the cabin hatless. He tossed hand in greeting, his stubble-blackened face breaking into a wide and friendly smile. But Lanny, studying him closely, agreed instantly with Jeth Carfax that he had the earmarks of the gallows-bound breed. It was Brazos Dalton in person, he hadn't a doubt, before the cattleman introduced himself and asked:

"Cruisin' after the Cheyennes, captain? Plenty of 'em been shackin' along—headin', we figured, for some big council. Light down and rest your saddle. I'm roundin' up beef for your camp."

He caught Lanny's look and swallowed so that his Adam's apple bobbed up and down in long, brown throat. Shadler thought he nearly made the mistake of calling him by name.

"We'd like to water the horses, Dalton," said Captain Walbank, sliding to the ground. "Yes, we're looking for Indians, but mainly Sioux."

"Ain't seen any Sioux," Dalton denied a little too hastily. "Help yourself! Water trough's down at the corral, and the creek's yonder. Come into the house, captain, and have suthin'?"

Lanny nudged Walbank unseen, and the cavalry officer nodded, handing his reins to a sergeant. With a second lieutenant and Lanny, he followed the talkative Dalton up the grass-grown path to the door. The plainsman kept his eyes on the ground, seeking the prints of barefoot Indian ponies. But the clutter of shoe-tracks prevented his discovering any, if any were there, without studying the sign at some length.

He was right behind Walbank as they entered the dismal and slovenly

two-room cabin, one being the kitchen. A pine plank table stood near the middle of the front room. It was heaped with such odds and ends as a broken spur, a horsehair bridle, a bradawl and strips of rawhide for mending gear, and—Lanny's roving eye gleamed!—a redstone chief's pipe, undoubtedly Indian property.

Dalton was saying, "Captain, I've got a demijohn of prime corn likker in the kitchen. If you can find cheers enough, squat—"

He was interrupted by Shadler, who had stepped to the table, picked up the Indian pipe. "Been havin' red visitors, I see?"

Brazos Dalton's smile broke slowly. His answer was even slower in coming, as if the discovery had a paralyzing effect.

"Oh, yeh," he said. "Must 'a' been the Cheyennes who dropped in yesterday, demandin' food. Little bunch of twenty or so, but they had us feelin' our guns till they rode off."

"Cheyennes on the warpath asked for food instead of takin' your scalps?" Shadler's brows climbed. "Funny! Specially since the feathers on the stem are notched Sioux style."

But Dalton had his wits about him now. "Well, I took 'em for Cheyennes. I'm from the Comanche country and dunno those northern tribes so well."

Lanny said nothing—to Dalton. But when the cattleman had gone back to the kitchen, the plainsman nodded significantly, whispered close to Captain Walbank's ear, "We'll have a look at his cattle next. It's a wolf outfit and I'll prove it!"

CHAPTER IX

Gun-Tough Hombres

EVERY soldier and his mount refreshed by the cool creek water, the detachment reassembled and at sharp command trotted by fours toward the roundup ground on the flats. When the captain expressed a wish to see the cattle soon to be delivered at the U. T. & E. camp, Brazos Dalton had betrayed no suspicion of Walbank's real purpose. He hurriedly lifted his double-rigged saddle off the corral fence, to slap it on a bay horse. But, covertly watching the supposed Texas cowman, Lanny did not doubt his apprehensive state of mind.

Troop C halted and sat at ease, well back out of the roundup dust. Shadler, the captain and Brazos moved up closer to a group of loosely herded stock, the beef cut. Here the cavalryman was of no practical use, for a cattle brand was just a mark on a steer's hide to him. But the range-born Lanny was scanning with a practiced eye every burned hip in the restless herd that was observable to an outrider.

Double Eight was the brand. Shadler thought how easily a skilful rustler could, with wet blanket and running-iron or red-hot cinch ring, work over the Fiddleback into the Double Eight. There was a road brand, too, just as if these long-horned steers had come up the trail from Texas. But Lanny would have bet a month's pay they hadn't traveled any farther than the ten miles from the ranges of Jeth Carfax and his neighbors. Brand blotting and road branding could have been done in one operation, and the cattle had ranged at Pine Ridge long enough for the wounds to heal over and appear old.

"No culls in that bunch, captain," Brazos was talking to Walbank. But his glance covertly roved to the silent Lanny, as though he were informed of the latter's earlier occupation as a cowboy and expected some sort of outburst. "We got here with around twelve hundred head, lost a lot to the Injuns, drowned and so forth. If you'll wait a mo', I'll get my range boss and find out how soon he'll be ready to drive."

He spurred away, shouting to one

of the alert herd riders: "Where's Tom?"

"Down in the creek bottom some'eres," retorted the cowpuncher.

"Well?" The captain glanced at Lanny.

"That's a pretty thin excuse to leave us and warn the gang," replied Shadler. "You'll see 'em makin' tracks, by twos and threes, presently —towards the ranch house to fort up, or off the range entirely. Dalton spots me as havin' cow savvy, knows what we're really here for. If them fellows holdin' the beef cut are a sample, it's a gang of gun-tough hombres Brazos has workin' for him. A dozen or more of 'em, under cover, could give us a fight."

"Oh, I'm ready for that!" chuckled Captain Walbank, his eye lighting with a battlesome gleam. "But we'd better prove first—"

Lanny laid hand on the lariat coiled in tie-straps. "I'll rope down one of those steers and feel out its brand. I can tell whether it's been changed or not. That end cowboy's watchin' like a hawk. He's caught the trouble scent."

"Have your gun loose. You'll probably have to shoot it out with him," the cavalryman said as Lanny untied his rope, and Walbank faced backward in the saddle. "Hello!" he exclaimed. "Who's that coming up the creek? One of our boys from camp!"

SHADLER turned also, rope in hand. A horseman in army blue was splashing across the creek, spurring his mount up the flats, and he shouted at the assembled troop as he half drew in his lathered mount. Walbank's lieutenant waved him on. The dispatch rider raced up to the captain and the plainsman, swinging his horse broadside to salute wearily, while his other hand fumbled inside his dust-whitened tunic.

"Major Pladwell's compliments, sir." The courier breathed hard, sweat rolling off his brown face. "Important dispatch, sir."

Lanny watched the captain's face, forgetting the rope and the cattle, as Walbank scanned the message. The thin nostrils were flaring when Captain Billy glanced up.

"Orders to report immediately for duty against the Cheyennes, Lanny. They've jumped the grading

camps below Stony River, and both troops are needed. You're working for Heeley, not the army, but Major Pladwell specially requests that you come along."

Lanny glanced back at the cattle. More cowboys had appeared, riding on the far side of the beef cut, and Brazos Dalton was walking his horse toward the group of three. Plainly the outfit had prepared for the worst. Their boldness suggested that Kilgore, with Burnt Thigh's warriors, might be within call if needed. Any move of Lanny's to examine a brand was going to precipitate hostilities.

"Well, I can't fight this outfit lone-handed, cap, and no tellin' how long you'd be delayed if you tied into the gang." Lanny strapped on his rope. "They'll keep, though, and I'll get the evidence when they deliver the first lot of cattle. Orders is orders—I'm with you!"

"All right, O'Malley," Walbank nodded to the messenger. "You made a good ride. We'll go back with you at once."

Brazos Dalton, seeing them turn their horses, spurred up. A look of relief crossed his face which Lanny and the captain failed to see. He called:

"Leavin' already? Have the Injuns attacked?"

Walbank told him as the cowman surged alongside. Lanny Shadler bored Brazos with a steely eye.

"Tell Kilgore I'm plumb sorry to've missed him. Tell him not to leave Sioux pipes layin' around if he wants to fool me!"

"Kilgore? Who's he?" Brazos wore a blank expression, but Shadler noticed he had lashed down his holster-bottoms to either leg. Little doubt but that he had been prepared to fight. And Troop C would have given him a bellyful if marching orders hadn't intervened.

Shadler laughed mockingly. "Of course, if you don't know him, you can't tell him. See you at camp, Brazos, though you probably hope the Cheyennes raise my hair." The plainsman scratched his sorrel and went pounding back to the command with captain and dispatch rider.

A CRISP "Forward!" set the troop in motion for the return trip. At the railhead camp, it was found that Troop D and the other half of Troop C already had departed for Stony River, nine miles westward, Major Pladwell commanding in person. The Indians were continually pulling down the telegraph wires and burning the poles, but the graders' call for help had gotten through and Captain Walbank led his remounted outfit into the stage road at a run.

"Knew a fight was brewin' from all the sign we cut, cap'n!" Lanny shouted as he and Walbank galloped abreast of each other, the wind in their throats. "Must be a big passel of Cheyennes!"

Walbank's face was set in stern lines. "The major'll hold 'em till we get there, if there's a thousand of the beggars."

Not a thousand, but at least half that many Cheyennes had launched a raid on the grading outfit, toiling at Stony River to prepare the way for the track-laying gang. And Tall Elk, the head chief, was pushing the attack vigorously when Major Pladwell headed his troops into the fray.

The graders' dugout forts, roofed with sheet iron, each affording shelter to a half dozen riflemen, were all that had kept the Cheyennes from sacking the camp in the first hour. Pladwell had dismounted his men, throwing forward a skirmish line, when he perceived the odds against him.

The forage caps of the troopers dotted the sage clumps in irregular formation as they knelt and fired ragged volleys at the racing, whooping redmen. Tall Elk proved a better general than most Indians. He

waited until the graders, wildly jubilant at the troopers' arrival, were running from their huts beside the grade to join the soldiers in the sage, a hundred yards away.

Beyond carbine range, Tall Elk pranced his spotted pony to and fro before a line of warriors drawn up in close rank, a hundred fighting Cheyennes. Rearward another solid phalanx of feather-decked bronze figures, lance-heads gleaming, sat restive ponies; another behind that, and still another. Tall Elk faced the waiting soldiers and graders. The latter had foolishly left their dugouts, and he anticipated riding over all with wave after wave of pony riders and getting the cavalry horses.

Major Pladwell needed the advice of an experienced plainsman like Lanny at that moment. He should have retreated to the dugouts with the road builders before the first line of Indians moved. But he was stubborn, and in the past had seen more than one such charge recoil upon itself when volleying carbines emptied half the saddle pads.

His men were good marksmen and regularly their arms and equipment were inspected, more than could be said of some other cavalry units of the period. Besides, the dugouts would be overcrowded, putting men in one another's way, with over a hundred troopers sharing quarters designed to shelter but six men to each hut.

Tall Elk thudded to the extreme right wing of the waiting lines. His copper-banded arm flashed a signal and he yelled in a far-carrying voice. The yell was echoed from a hundred and more throats; the ponies leaped forward. Crouched behind the firing line, saber in one hand, pistol in the other, Major Pladwell passed the word to troop captain and lieutenants, down on their knees, to hold fire until sure of cutting down a brave with every shot. The hoof thunder made the ground tremble, as the line of flourished lances darted nearer. Officers spoke behind uneasy blue-coated figures:

"Ready! Aim! Fire!"

GUN thunder engulfed the roar of hoofs and seemingly a warrior or pony had fallen for every bullet launched. The first line was broken and swerved, whooping, from the field. But the second line of warriors was on the way, like a feather-crested tidal wave. Soldiers and laborers emptied guns. The second charge was stalled but not entirely beaten back. And Tall Elk hurled the remaining warriors forward to fill the gaps in the wavering line.

Major Pladwell shouted to the bugler, and the latter rose on one knee to blow "Retreat." It was an orderly retreat, although the Cheyennes caught some with their carbines unloaded. Lance thrusts downed a bluecoat here, a laborer there, and reeking scalps were slung to beaded belts. A hundred yards separated the white men from shelter, and the majority reached it, facing the enemy.

Pladwell turned the corner of a hut to reach the door on the far side. The captain of Troop D, several privates and laborers were ahead of him. He was last man, and heard a warrior screeching at his heels. Wheeling swiftly, the major emptied his pistol at the leaning red rider, as a lance drove at him.

One bullet struck the Cheyenne's leg, cutting through to the body of his pony, which stumbled, hurling the brave closer to the cavalry officer. He rose up, his weight on his one good leg, reaching for scalp knife. The major's saber flashed and nearly decapitated the Cheyenne. Then he stooped and crawled through the door of the hut, undaunted but breathing heavily.

The Indians raced around the dugouts. But being built half under the ground and roofed with iron, the little forts were discouraging objects of attack. Fire arrows had no effect on them, and the loopholed walls were

soon spitting death at all warriors within range, despite the crowding of the inmates. Tall Elk looked about for the troopers' mounts. He was not ready to quit the field, but it was well to capture those horses while the soldiers were helpless to prevent it.

The horse-holders of the troop had driven the animals into a grassy swale on the south, below the grade on which the laborers had been working. When the handful of soldiers saw the uprearing heads of painted warriors around their covert, they fought till every man was down. Shouting a victory song, the Indians stampeded the cavalry mounts out of the swale, up across the grade.

Only thirty warriors had been sent to steal the horses while Tall Elk, with the major portion of his little army, continued to harass the men in the dugouts. Five Cheyennes had paid in blood for the horse lifting, and the remainder, outriding the stampede, were startled by a bugle call. They had heard that sound before—the pony soldiers' signal to charge.

The rest of Troop C was coming at lunging gallop. Well up in front, his tawny mane flying in the breeze, thundered Lanny Shadler. Sided by a squad of troopers, he bore down on the horses and the Indian convoy, to cut them off from the main band. Captain Walbank rode full pelt at the harrying circles under Tall Elk.

"Got to save those horses, sarge!" Shadler bellowed at the grizzled sergeant pounding beside him. "Loss of 'em would leave more'n half the force unmounted."

"An' out on a limb," supplemented Sergeant Casey. " 'Tain't goin' to be easy, Lanny!"

SOME of the Indians were shaking blankets to scare the loose cavalry mounts into madder flight. These were first to stop the whistling lead of eight charging troopers and one plainsman. The horse-lifters scudded ahead of the riderless band, drumming with moccasined heels. Lanny tilted up smoking Colts and veered away from the retreating Cheyennes. The Fiddleback sorrel was no stranger to stampeded stock and instantly responded to the iron hand which lifted him across the path of the racing horses. Lanny whipped off his flat-crowned hat and yelled like a being berserk.

"Tail me, Casey!" he shouted, with one quick glance at the hard-riding squad. "Turn 'em!"

Pistols and carbines roared above the leaders' flattened ears. A trooper's horse, colliding with one of the wild running band, went down, but the soldier scrambled up and ran for his life. Pounding with his hat and shooting reloaded Colts, Lanny felt the front of the stampede yielding, slanting over to the left. Sergeant Casey and the squad, minus one man, were holding the line behind him, jabbing with rifle butts.

While the leading horses cut a wide arc, paced by Shadler, out from the dugouts poured the men of Troops C and D. Captain Walbank's headlong dash had broken the circle of Indians around the graders' forts, sent the whole war party racing up the grade and into the plains. But they would rally, hardly a doubt of that. Major Pladwell's long legs were pistoning as he shouted orders. The thing to do was hit leather and support Walbank's thin line before the Cheyennes turned on him.

"No time to choose mounts, major!" shouted Lanny, and Pladwell snatched at the reins of the first horse he came to, on the edge of the milling band.

"Owing to you and Sergeant Casey we've got the horses!" panted the major, springing for the saddle and jerking the refractory animal's head around. He gazed anxiously toward the rolling dust northward, beyond the grade, then back at the troopers frenziedly yanking mounts out of the huddled mass. "That Tall

Elk's a smart Indian, Shadler, and if he could be put out of the fight, it'd help a lot."

Lanny kept that in mind as he spurred his sweating horse toward the smoke-slashed plain. With half of Troop D mounted, Pladwell was rushing to support Captain Billy Walbank. The sun was dipping low behind the painted buttes above Stony River. But when Shadler reached the halted Walbank column, as the dust settled somewhat, he saw that Chief Tall Elk was bent on one more charge before night fell. The Cheyenne chief, his war bonnet trailing over his pony's haunches, was riding to and fro on a grassy knoll above the disrupted war party. He was evidently haranguing them, though the sound of his voice carried but faintly to the dusty troopers and the plainsman.

Lanny looked back. The rest of Troops C and D were hurrying to join the line. The graders were standing outside their forts, eager to side the relief column, but having no mounts to participate in saddlework. It was a pitifully thin line of blue to charge that milling mass of hooting Indians, yet the old Army of the Frontier was often outnumbered.

Shadler squared his shoulders, urged his mount alongside the group of officers holding council of war.

"Unless they fall into line for a charge, don't do nothin' till you see the big war chief drop," the plainsman advised briefly.

"What d'you mean, Lanny?" Walbank glanced at him quickly, wiping blood from a lance-cut cheek with his sleeve. "Our horses need a breathing spell, so do Troop D's. But there's a sprint left in every mount, and the major thinks it best to charge first and while they're disorganized."

"And have 'em surround and whittle you down fast, out in mid-plain." Lanny gave Pladwell a sharp look. "Gimme a chance to drop the big un —then sound your charge. Don't watch where I go, or they'll catch on."

Major Pladwell bridled, but common sense overruled his military pride. Shadler knew what he was talking about. And when the plainsman backed his horse away and rode for the grade, not an officer's eye followed him, though a curious trooper or two turned chin against shoulders.

CHAPTER X

Green Hides

SKILFUL as any Indian stalking an enemy, Lanny Shadler recrossed the grade a quarter mile above the dugouts. He disappeared between the walls of a thirty-foot cut-bank running north, and stopped at the northernmost end to peer over the rim. All during his maneuvers he had expected to hear a concerted war cry and thunder of hoofs, announcing that the redskin cavalry had charged. With hat off, he surveyed the battleground, saw that the Cheyennes were wheeling into fighting formation while the voice of Tall Elk thundered.

"Not much time to get him!" reflected the plainsman, swinging over the rim of the cut-bank, flat as a snake. He glided toward a thicket of alders, but was not halfway to cover when the Cheyenne war chief pivoted his pony on the rounded hillock and started down to lead the warriors in the final dash.

Shadler froze, lifting his Springfield. Tall Elk had caught the movement of the buckskin figure, though it partly blended with the brownish-yellow plains grass. Incredible ferocity rode the aquiline features, striped with yellow and vermilion paint. The Northern Cheyennes once had been disposed to friendliness, but certain greedy white men had engendered the hate that kills.

Tall Elk's yell betrayed surprise, as well as ferocity, to find the plainsman practically within their lines. The warrior horde on the far side of the knoll was at first unaware of what had caused the chief's outcry. But

when a rifle cracked and Tall Elk yelled again, a hint of the truth was borne to them.

The big Cheyenne was riding furiously at Lanny, lance raised and bullhide shield held before his breast. Lanny fired from a heel-squat and Tall Elk swayed, yelling as he hurled the shining lance. It slithered through the grass, for the red arm which had flung it was partly paralyzed. Shadler aimed for a heart-shot as the bullhide shield sagged down. The spotted pony was racing by at less than a hundred yards.

Tall Elk jerked as the Springfield spat its leaden missile, pitched headlong. Lanny was racing for the cut-bank and his horse when the Cheyenne thudded to earth and sprawled motionless.

Around the knoll warriors were flogging ponies, but the plainsman was up in the saddle and tearing southward before the red riders reached the cut-bank's rim. A bugle sounded dimly in his ears, then a drumming of countless hoofs and the fighting cry of white men.

The Second Cavalry was sweeping forward, and Lanny, glancing back and upward, saw the Indians galloping along the rim pull up. From their excited talk, carried on the wind as he rode hard, some were of a mind to join the main band in meeting the cavalry charge, while others wanted to keep on after the white man who had killed Tall Elk.

Lanny's horse was in no condition for a long race, but, with his head start, the brief indecision of the warriors enabled the plainsman to top out on the lower end of the cut-bank. Less than a quarter mile eastward, the left wing of the Second Cavalry was plowing through a yellow haze, and Lanny swung at right angles. A quarter of a mile—a little under that. Could he make it?

HE hung in the spurs, bent low. The Cheyennes, numbering a score or more, slanted away from the cut-bank rim and hammered pony flanks to ride him down. His Springfield jetted flame and a pony somersaulted. He reloaded, his brown face shiny with sweat; fired, and a brave slid over his pony's flannel-braided tail. Trade guns were roaring, making much smoke and noise, but the lead hadn't reached him.

"Come on and catch hell!" Shadler gritted, and stopped another pony in midstride.

His horse was laboring, but one more spurt would do it! The yells of his pursuers were getting fainter, their savage faces becoming less distinct in the filming dust between. Spurs bit straining flanks. Lanny hated to do it, but the sorrel needed the steel to lift it over the last three hundred yards.

A trooper caught the thud of hoofs pounding in on his left and swiveled carbine, lowering it just in time.

"Why'n hell don't you sing out, scout!" he shouted as Lanny pulled alongside.

"Use your eyes, swaddy!" Shadler yelled back, grinning, in no mood to quarrel since he had saved his hair. "Do I look like a painted Injun? It was nip and tuck after I plugged Tall Elk!"

Knee and knee with the trooper he pointed for the broken ranks of the Cheyennes. Other chiefs charged about with rallying cries, but theirs was not the quality of leadership that Tall Elk had possessed, and Tall Elk was gone. Though the red host retreated before the lesser cavalry force, Major Pladwell wisely did not crowd his luck. He remembered Shadler's words about being surrounded on the open plains, cut off from water and supplies. The Second Cavalry might find itself in such a fix if the Indians got their second wind and began to circle.

So, in the twilight, the bugler sounded ringing notes which pierced the scattering fire of carbines and hoots of the Cheyennes. The blue-clad line fell back in orderly procession,

but not too slowly, and Major Pladwell was asking:

"Anybody seen Shadler? It was his shooting of Tall Elk that gave us the breaks."

Both the major and Captain Billy Walbank had unpleasant visions of Lanny lying badly wounded on the darkening field. But their spirits rose as his stalwart buckskin figure was seen mingling with horsemen in army blue as the soldiers reached the grading camp and off-saddled. Sentinels were posted, and as night clamped down, with only stars to relieve the gloom, the weary Second relaxed and gave thought to empty bellies. The Cheyennes, if contemplating another attack, were almost certain to hold off until dawn.

No fires were lighted as the troopers camped on the grade, for the Cheyennes were master bowmen. They could launch arrows undetected by the pickets and strike down silhouetted figures. But the grading camp afforded plenty of rough fare, and the grateful boss of the graders fed the relief party with a lavish hand.

"We're short on meat," he apologized, "though we couldn't cook none tonight nohow. Say—" he turned on Shadler—"when is Heeley sendin' some beef up the line? We ate the last buffalo hams yesterday. Dan said he was goin' to—"

"He did," Lanny interposed, with a grim smile. "Supply wagons'll be fetchin' out beef in a day or two, if the Cheyennes don't jump 'em."

HE was not subject to the major's orders. Nevertheless, midnight found him doing voluntary picket duty, seated under sandy embankment, rifle across knees. Dark forms flitted hither and yon on the plains, but he knew the Indians were hauling away their dead. No fires blazed up in the outer darkness, to show that the tribesmen were encamped. To Shadler's mind it indicated the Cheyennes had enough of fighting the Second Cavalry and that dawn would find them gone.

He remained on the watch until the stars winked out and the sage clumps took definite shape. But his peering eyes could discover no sign of Indians, living or dead—only windrows of slain ponies, here and there a cavalry horse with legs thrust stiffly upward. He knocked out his pipe on high boot heel and walked into the grading camp as "Reveille" was blasting the peaceful silence.

"It's all right to light breakfast fires," he announced to Major Pladwell, who appeared sleepy-eyed in the doorway of the camp boss's shack. "The reddies have slipped off the skyline and it looks like they won't be back."

To be on the safe side, the Second Cavalry hung around the better part of that day, Shadler following their trail on a lone scout several miles out. When he returned, late in the afternoon, with a satisfactory report, the Second climbed into saddles and bade the grading gangs good-by. Work had been resumed on the roadbed as if nothing had occurred to interrupt it.

Night had fallen again when the two troops jogged into the railhead camp, where "canvas town" was roaring, as it did from sundown to dawn every night along the steel trail.

When Lanny sat in at late mess and saw that fresh beef was an item of the menu, his blue-gray eyes narrowed. He set strong teeth in a forkful of roast meat, thinking:

"First time I ever chewed a piece of rustled beef and knew it. Brazos sure is a powdersmoke gambler, after what happened at his ranch."

He hurried through his meal and left the kitchen car to hunt up Dan Heeley. Until now he had had no opportunity to tell the boarding contractor of occurrences at the Double Eight.

"And you found a Sioux pipe clutterin' his table, eh?" Heeley made a smacking sound with his lips. "That was a hard one for him to lie out of,

no mistake. He drove in here with a hundred head this mornin', Lanny, and all day me butchers have been busy dressin' that beef, so's Dalton could take the hides back. He bought 'em, for what reason I dunno, fetchin' a wagon to carry the same."

The plainsman grunted disgustedly. "Dan, you're no cowman or you'd know he was makin' off with the evidence that beef was rustled! If a brand's been worked it shows up on the underside—both sides, for that matter—and Dalton knows I've been a cowboy and would inspect the hides. How does he know? Why Kilgore told him, of course! I figured to be on hand when them thieves made delivery, but I'll be trackin' out to Double Eight again, come mornin'."

"You will like hell!" The rawboned contractor jabbed the plainsman with his pipe stem, grinning slyly. "How do ye know but what your friend Brazos is still here? That skinnin' job ain't quite done, me lad. Now, Brazos was askin' particular about you—how long you'd be gone and all that. I said I didn't know as ye'd be back a-tall, as ye'd gone to fight the whole Cheyenne nation, accordin' to what the gradin' boss telegraphed."

" 'He's a great guy, that Shadler,' says Brazos, or words to that effect, 'and I hope no dirty Injun lifts his hair!'

"But I didn't believe him, Lanny. And me eyes were trickin' me if he wasn't lookin' relieved. So, not expectin' you, not soon anyways, Brazos and his four cowhands—tougher nuts never straddled leather—are occupyin' bunks in one of the boardin' cars. I can show you which one, but take my advice and wait till daylight to brace them—unless you get the cavalry to help."

"I'll handle 'em, with just Sandburr Beeson to back me!" Shadler's slitted eyes were asmoke. "Five men to drive a hundred steers! It might look to others like Brazos was actin' to protect his little jag of cattle from Indian raiders. But me, I know he fetched a coupla extra gunhands in case he had to smoke his way out of camp. Dan, let's go have a look-see at them hides. I'm sure in my mind, but I want to prove it to you."

TOGETHER they left the siding and went down the south embankment, with the stench of the portable slaughter house in their nostrils. By lantern light several blood-smeared butchers were still dressing beef in the row of sheds, and Shadler caught sight of a wagon at the corner, piled with dripping cowskins. He mounted a wheel and dragged several to the ground, while Heeley fetched a lantern, asking a question of the head butcher.

"Yeh, got 'em all skinned and Dalton's wagon is ready when he is," replied the butcher. "What's Shadler doin'?"

Heeley made him no answer, but hastened back to Lanny with the lantern. As its rays fell across the green hides, spread underside upward on the ground, the plainsman-cowboy, on his knees, pointed to that portion which had covered the flanks of the living cattle.

"There's your evidence, Dan! Original burn Fiddleback—these lighter lines, made last, changin' it to Double Eight. Notice the road brand ain't two different shades—all one scar, nothin' added. Put on to carry out the idea of a trail herd from Texas, when the stock wasn't more than ten

miles off its home range. Sandburr Beeson over there at the sheds?"

He got up and began tossing the blood-slippery hides into the wagon. Heeley set up a shout for Beeson, and the stocky buffalo butcher responded in gory overalls.

"How, Lanny?" The oldster removed cob pipe from teeth and spat. "What you want of the old man?"

"Get a hen on with Brazos Dalton's crew," the plainsman said, "and I don't know a better man to side me than you, old rawhide. Not tonight, because that boardin' car is black as hell's hip-pocket and some of the road hands in there might get nicked. Be ready at sunup, packin' your short gun."

"Hell or a hair-raise, it's all one to me!" Sandburr grinned.

The track-layers had finished breakfast. They were trotting out to right of way, to grab ties, rails and tools, and greet the new day with thunder, when Lanny Shadler turned to Sandburr Beeson, speaking low:

"Sleepin' late, the varmints! Wonder do they expect to eat?"

Plainsman and butcher were between the main track and the siding, watching one of the eighty-foot-long boarding cars for the appearance of Brazos Dalton and his gunfighters. The last road hand had left the car, and Lanny moved forward, .44's loose in holsters. If the rustlers had snored on after "Reveille" sounded in the cavalry camp, possibly six-shooter music would arouse them.

Lanny was a few feet from the boarding car when several men descended the steps at the far end, and though their backs were turned, the double-decker gunbelts proclaimed them Dalton's powder-burners. None wore the buckskin jumper and wide-winged chaps of Brazos, but his absence was instantly explained when the last man to step down called over his shoulder:

"Rattle your hocks, Braz, or they'll be throwin' the grub to the coyotes!"

In turning his head, the outlaw glimpsed the buckskin-clad Shadler and Beeson on the cinder path. He said something in a startled tone to his saddle-mates, and they spun about.

"What's up, Shadler?" demanded the man who had warned the others, his hands spread clawlike over gun butts.

"Looks like you knew the answer, brand-burner!" retorted Shadler, halting, aware that what he said would reach Brazos Dalton inside the long car.

THE gang was assured the hour of reckoning had struck. And without waiting to hear that those green hides had borne witness against them, they jerked guns.

The plainsman made lightning passes with his hands, filling them as he dropped into a deadly crouch. Sandburr imitated him. The guns volleyed and a cattle thief folded at the knees, his lowered Colts lashing the cinders with flaming lead. Lanny, heedless of the bullet ripping fringe from his shoulder, shifted aim to another crouching killer and hammered slugs into the barrel chest. The gunfighter stumbled, fell, churning lead which snarled and bit at Dalton's stooped figure, but not deep enough to cause sagging of the tense body.

Sandburr had downed a man as he tried to roll behind the trucks. Barring Dalton, inside the car, only one outlaw remained, fighting tigerishly to a finish. His mighty torso rising from a bank of gunsmoke, split by the red flashes of his guns, Lanny Shadler pitched two bullets into the tiger man. Blood spurted from the latter's neck. Simultaneously a bluish hole appeared between the vicious eyes. Either wound would have finished him. The cow thief seemed to plunge beneath the rising smoke, flinging pistols ahead of him, and lay inert as a stone.

Lanny straightened groggily, speaking low to Beeson, whose left arm dripped crimson:

"Brazos still to get, old rawhide! You take the far door."

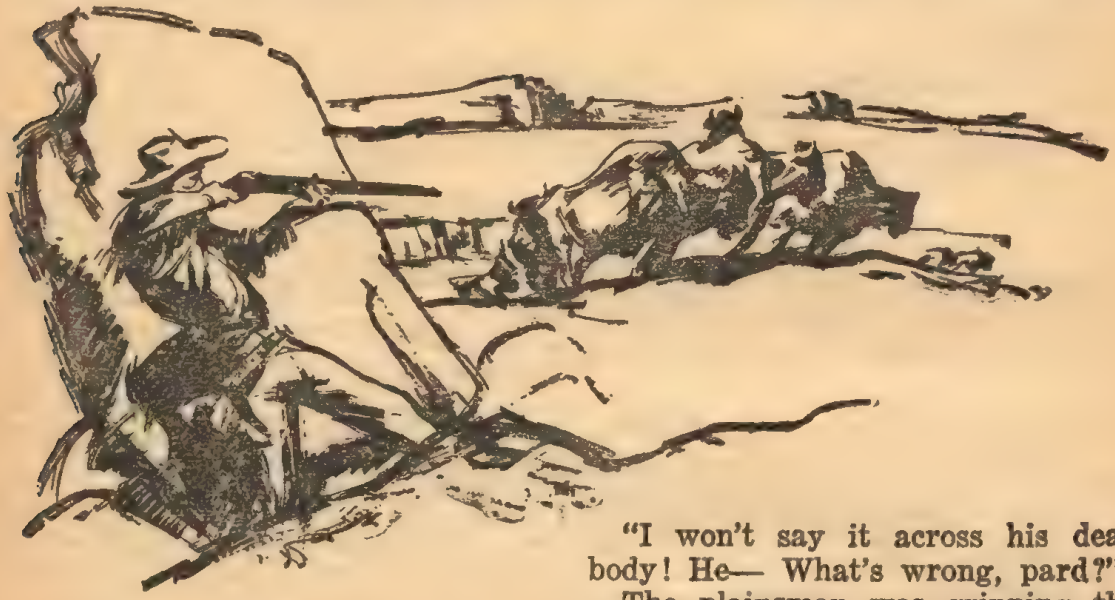
He was plugging fresh shells into empty .44 chambers. Sandburr, with merely a nod, trotted forward and Lanny vanished up the nearer steps. He glided cautiously into the bunk-car, pistols to the fore. Besides hammocks stretched on braces, a line of bunks built into each side met his exploring eye. The hammocks were empty enough, but one of those bunks might hide the man he sought.

Sideboard partitions, rising from floor to ceiling between each double tier of bunks, would afford ample concealment to a man crouched on his knees or stretched lengthwise. Even as Lanny heard Sandburr's boots clumping in the far vestibule, a venom-choked voice hailed him low from halfway down the aisle:

"You're a little less noisy than your pard, Shadler, but I hear you. Too damn bad Kilgore ain't here to take his own medicine! I'm trapped, but I'll get you and the oldster sure. You're first!"

Shadler had halted ten feet from the door, glance probing the right side of the car and trying to locate exactly the bunk in which the desperate man lay. Suddenly a head and shoulder projected from a lower bunk, arm extended and tipped at fingers' end with blued steel. The gun belched and Lanny dodged—but the bullet struck him. He fired at a face half blurred by smoke before Brazos could jerk back. There was a sighing moan, and the cow thief sagged outward, spilled his full length in the aisle.

BY the far door old Sandburr barged in, his pistol raised, just as Dalton lost his hold on life. The grizzled butcher knew death when he saw it and lowered gun toward the holster at his hip. He advanced and stood over the fallen man, opened his mouth, closed it and looked at Lanny.



"I won't say it across his dead body! He— What's wrong, pard?"

The plainsman was gripping the side of a bunk; his knees seemed rubbery. He smiled, saying:

"It was rocky diggin'—he clipped me in the left side. Feel dizzy. Brazos blabbed on Kilgore, and now's the time to get that long-lived coyote. He'll be at the Double Eight ranch; probably there now, waitin' for Brazos to bring the cattle money. The Sioux'll be with him and the rest of Dalton's gunfighters. It's a job for both of Pladwell's troops. Means a big fight. I'll have my reckonin' with Kilgore, switch the beef contract—"

He let go of the bunkside as if to walk forward and collapsed, hat brim flattening under his rolling head.

"Hell a'mighty!" yelled Sandburr, pounding to his side and kneeling.

"He's kilt! No—no, he ain't! Heart's thumpin', yet that wound's on the left side."

He slid hands beneath the plainsman's armpits and, grunting at the dead weight of him, contrived to roll Lanny's long body into a bunk. Sandburr started doorward at a foot gallop, just as Dan Heeley, with the construction superintendent and others, filed in from the vestibule.

"Gangway!" yelled the old butcher, worming through them. "I got to fetch that army sawbones. For Lanny—sure! He's lead-poisoned enough to pass out. Take a look yonder."

Beeson clumped across the new rails reaching westward to the Wyoming border, beeline for the tents of the Second Cavalry. And when the surgeon had departed at a double-quick, Sandburr broke in upon Major Pladwell unceremoniously. Though Lanny might not live to know how it ended, Sandburr was losing no time in sending a full force of cavalry on the trail to Double Eight. Pladwell saw eye to eye with the absent Shadler in the matter of rounding up Kilgore, the Ogallala rustlers and the last of Dalton's gunslingers.

"Glad you rushed the word to me, Sandburr." Pladwell was standing, buckling on saber and short gun. "I sent an orderly to find what the shooting was about, but he isn't back yet. You want to go along? Can use another good fighting man. I hope Shadler isn't—"

"Don't say it, major!" Beeson's eyes were imploring. "He's salt of the earth! Thankee, I'd enjoy the fight and like partic'lar to line my sights on Kilgore. He's done the boy many a meanness. But I got to stay by Lanny till I see how he's comin'."

And while the army surgeon probed for the bullet in Shadler's side, sending word by Beeson to anxious men outside that the wound wasn't serious at all, the stirring call of "Boots and Saddles" rang through the army camp. Workmen on right of way paused a moment to watch both troops of the Second swing northwest at brisk trot and ask one another:

"Where's the yellow-legs paradin' to this time?"

CHAPTER XI

Powdersmoke Gambler

LANNY SHADLER saw the bearded face of Sandburr Beeson above him and attempted to sit up. The oldster gently prodded him back against the rolled blanket serving as a pillow.

"You tryin' to rassle me, Sandy, or what?" The plainsman's tone was irritable. "And what the hell am I layin' here for? I'd admire to know."

"Well," began Sandburr, "you was shot by Brazos and—"

With a thrust of the arm which surprised Beeson by its power—and delighted him, also—Shadler swept the oldster aside and swung his feet to the car floor. He was stripped of boots and buckskins, clad in his underwear. There was a stiffness and dull pain in his left side which caused him to look down, grimacing.

"All bound round like a sore thumb!" he chuckled, good humor returning. "You mean well, Sandy, but if you think I'm campin' in bed when I've a prime chance of peggin' Kilgore's hide on the fence, you're plumb witless! Fetch my clothes, old hand, and my shootin'-irons. I'm ridin' with the cavalry."

From a distance Sandburr considered him with a pleased grin in his shaggy mat of beard. "Well, I must say, in spite of that sawbones, you don't act like a man who oughta be a-bed. But the cavalry's done been gone around a half hour or so—both troops." He chuckled again. "I gave 'em your orders and the old major hopped to it! Why not let 'em wipe out Kilgore, the Injuns and Double Eight without you? You done a-plenty, Lanny."

Shadler, for answer, lunged off the bunk. He had spied his missing outfit across the aisle.

"It was the shock of that bullet knocked me out. I'm fine now! And a half hour ain't much handicap for that sorrel horse I got from Jeth Carfax." He was pulling on tight-fitting buckskin breeches as he spoke.

His guess that Kilgore, with Burnt Thigh's Sioux, would be heading in to the Double Eight ranch—if not already there—was near the truth. But Stack, returning from a cattle raid the previous afternoon, was delayed in reaching what he called his headquarters. With the help of twenty Sioux, he was driving fifty-odd longhorns from the range of Fiddleback's nearest neighbor on the west, Jack Selbie. Fiery ex-leader of Confederate cavalry, Selbie hit leather with all his cowhands as the Indians were clipping off the first mile toward Double Eight.

Stack Kilgore, experienced rustler, would have chosen to lift these cattle at night, for the large-scale raiding had put all the ranchers of the region on their guard. No longer was it possible to count easy coup on isolated bunches of stock. All but a scattered few hiding out in the brush above the Weeping Water had been driven closer to the home ranch of each outfit.

Since the Ogallalas refused to operate after nightfall, Kilgore, against his better judgment, had led them on the daylight foray. It resulted as he had feared, and even he was surprised at the swift pursuit of Selbie's outfit. They must, he figured, have had broncs saddled and waiting.

THE renegade had good reason to know the intrepidity of Texas cowboys and that small but mighty ex-cavalryman, Colonel Selbie. Kilgore hadn't enough Sioux along to whip them in a stand-up fight, and it would be fatal to his plans to lead them toward Pine Ridge.

The Selbie outfit would know where all cattle stolen during the past month or more had been driven. The escape of a single rider only was necessary to have the cattlemen swooping en masse on Double Eight. Already Stack was uneasy over Brazos Dalton's report of the visit of Shadler with the cavalry, which indicated a rising suspicion of the ranch at Pine Ridge.

Hazing the rangy longhorns at a gallop, the renegade had suddenly decided to abandon them and toll the Selbie outfit south into the Lodge Pole Hills, if Colonel Jack would trail him that far. Stack thought he would, though the cattle were turned adrift to be picked up by the owner. Past unpleasant contact with Jack Selbie convinced him the old firebrand would keep on after the raiders, now he had them in sight, to stamp out rustling.

Free of the stolen stock, Kilgore and his Ogallalas picked up speed. The Selbie outfit, numbering about fifteen, halted, evidently debating the question of further pursuit. But, facing back as he rode, Stack Kilgore saw the slight figure of Colonel Selbie leveling an arm in the direction of the escaping red riders. The cowhorses leaped under the spur and the chase was on again. Kilgore shouted in Sioux to his red comrades, some of whom were looking back and fitting arrows to bowstrings:

"Do not stop here, my brothers! The whoa-haw white men are strong fighters. In the hills we can kill them from ambush and take many scalps!"

Some of the warriors had been with Kilgore at the time Jeth Carfax and his cowboys scattered the war party besieging Lanny Shadler. They had sampled the fighting qualities of cowboys, and, unless vastly outnumbering the latter, preferred ambuscade to open battle. Cowboys and plainsmen fought alike, and when they aimed at man or horse they usually hit them. That was the Ogallalas' discouraging experience! But they were none the less avid for dripping scalps and raced with Kilgore toward the looming hills.

Colonel Jack Selbie, however, was wary of dashing pell-mell along the hill-flanked road, where dust of the red riders who preceded them still hung in shredding clouds.

"If those copper-bellies would stand their ground we'd charge and cut 'em to pieces like we did the Yanks, many's the time!" the ex-cavalryman growled, checking rein and flourishing his rifle as though it were the old saber adorning the wall of his living-room. "Scatter out, boys. We got to hunt 'em down. Jeth Carfax told me a buffalo hunter from the railroad warned him Stack Kilgore was with these Sioux. The second time we ketch that dog-robber, I promise you he won't get off because the hangrope busts. Shoot him!"

Ensued, then, a sort of hide-and-seek battle. The hills resounded with war whoop and rebel yell and crash of firearms, while arrows killed with silent deadliness. Which side was to be victorious was still in doubt when Burnt Thigh, with forty warriors, descended on the Lodge Pole Hills as the afternoon waned.

HAVING little to show for a day of raiding, because of the outfits' vigilance, the Ogallala chief encountered the grazing steers turned loose by Kilgore's party. In hoof-torn sod and trampled plains grass, he read sign of what had occurred there. Bunching up the longhorns, Burnt Thigh's party pointed southward. When the hills gave forth echoes of the flight in progress, Burnt Thigh brandished his lance in savage elation and split his band three ways. A handful of braves were to take charge of the longhorns, while the rest, in two large parties, entered the hills from north and west, scouts in advance.

While unable to distinguish between the strange signs with which white men marked their cattle, Burnt Thigh hoped that the cowmen were the same who had once defeated him, the Fiddlebackers. If so, it was the hour for the big revenge, for he was going into battle with his full force of warriors, counting those under Kilgore.

Colonel Jack Selbie had come through the fighting years of Civil War with scars and bitter memories. But that afternoon, with eight scrappy Texans left to side him, he faced annihilation by a superior force of Sioux, as did Custer, on a far battlefield, nine years later. It was a white savage's hand which tore away his scalp and tossed it on high, shrieking like any red Indian.

"For Mort and Jed!" yelled Kilgore. "You was there, Jack Selbie, pullin' hard on the rope. I'll have Jeth Carfax's hair, too, before I'm done!"

While the orgy of scalp-taking went on, an Ogallala left to watch the cattle flogged his pony to the side-valley among the hills, announcing a large force of Indians approaching. He thought they were Cheyennes, and therefore friendly. But he was not sure, and the little herd would be a temptation to any roving band. Blood-smeared, once more the cattle thief with the dollar-mark across his eyes, Stack Kilgore flung astride his pony. Burnt Thigh was hard after him, and as many more Sioux as could catch their ponies quickly.

The Indians riding eastward across the plain were numerous enough to destroy the Sioux more easily than Burnt Thigh's reinforcements had vanquished old Selbie's cowhands.

Little doubt existed but that the newcomers had had their eyes on the longhorns, protected only by a half dozen Ogallalas.

When the victorious war party emerged from the hills, however, the strangers halted, rank upon rank of tossing feathers and lance-heads. They were the Cheyennes defeated by the Second Cavalry. Kilgore suspected as much, having heard from Dalton of the courier's sudden appearance at Double Eight ranch with marching orders.

Two chiefs rode out from the main body, and Kilgore said to Burnt Thigh:

"Let us meet them and talk peace. We will lose the whoa-haws if they want to fight. They are too many for us."

White man and red chief immediately loped forth from the assembled Sioux, making the hand sign of peaceful intent. It was answered by both waiting Indians. One chief supplemented with a sidewise thrust of the hand, striking the edge of it against his other arm.

"Cut-arm, sign of the Cheyennes!" muttered Kilgore, his anxiety somewhat abating. "They oughta be friendly."

BURNT THIGH, the polished buffalo horns of his headdress shining in the fading sunlight, was drawing a hand across his throat, signifying "Cutthroat" or Sioux. And at last the three chiefs and the white man sat face to face. The Cheyennes showed a momentary surprise on observing that the rider with the buffalo shaped head was of the hated race. Kilgore asked, aiding speech with hand-talk:

"My brothers have come from fighting the pony soldiers up the line?"

They did not appear to be a victorious war party. No scalps were on display, but he was careful not to mention it. Dark scowls settled on the faces of the Cheyenne chiefs. The elder one replied:

"One sun ago we met them. Our great chief Tall Elk was slain and many warriors, many ponies. Yonder—" he swept his hand toward the south—"lies the big camp of the Iron Horse people. If my brothers, the Sioux, will join us we will wipe them from the plains."

Burnt Thigh answered. "We are all that you see here. This camp of the white men is stronger than the one the Cheyennes attacked. The pony soldiers will be back there now. If not, we would join our Cheyenne brothers in making war."

The two chiefs eyed the waiting Sioux and the restless longhorn herd. Kilgore broke in suddenly:

"Can my Cheyenne brothers tell if a yellow-haired buckskin man was killed at the grading camp? He fights with the pony soldiers."

The Cheyennes' eyes glowed with hatred, and the elder spat:

"We know this buckskin man. He did not die, but he will die! He is the one that killed Tall Elk!"

"Hell!" exploded Kilgore, disappointed. "I might 'a' knowed his luck would hold firm."

Not understanding him, the elder chief leveled an arm toward the cattle.

"Our bellies are lean. The buffalo are gone from here. You have many whoa-haws there."

Kilgore took the hint. He didn't want to part with any of the cattle to feed this mob, but better to let some of the stock go than lose all. The Cheyennes were without food, presumably en route to villages in the upper country, but they would not wait when cattle were before them for the taking.

"We will kill enough whoa-haws for a feast," he said, with an air of open-handedness. "Cheyenne and Sioux shall sit down together, like brothers should."

He was thinking there was no par-

ticular hurry in returning to Double Eight ranch. Today was the day Brazos Dalton was to deliver beef to that camp on the south, and Kilgore considered it a bit of luck that the Cheyennes hadn't encountered the small trail herd. So that the fires could not be seen from the railroad camp, the united bands retreated to the shadow of the hills and night found them gorging on Colonel Selbie's beef.

The sight infuriated Kilgore, but he had saved most of the steers and more might easily be rustled from the Selbie ranch. For the outfit lay stretched in death a long rifle-shot from the leaping cook-fires, around which flitted savage silhouettes, slicing chunks of raw and half-cooked meat from the tomahawked beeves.

At dawn, rising with their Cheyenne guests, the Sioux were prepared to depart for Double Eight, driving the longhorns that were left. Kilgore was in better humor, his palm itching for the feel of the money Dalton would have fetched from the commissary. If he had but known it, already Brazos and his powder-burners were cold clay and Lanny Shadler lay on a bunk in a boarding-car while frantic old Sandburr hot-footed it for the military camp.

SOME time later, as Kilgore and his Sioux were mounting to drive the remaining longhorns ranchward, a Cheyenne scout slid down from a hilltop. He dashed into camp reporting that soldiers were leaving the far-off railroad and riding northwest. Kilgore thought, "What's that mean? Double Eight lays up that way. If the yellow-legs had got wind of the Cheyennes over here in the hills, they'd be travelin' northeast."

He scrambled up the lookout hill, calling to Burnt Thigh to follow, and the renegade's telescope was brought into play. While the blue-coated column, tiny specs crawling like an army of ants, gradually vanished behind a roll in the plains, Stack Kilgore was chewing the cud of bitter reflection. He vibrated with rage as he closed the telescope and sat up, answering the inquiring look of Burnt Thigh.

"Chief, our luck is played out! I'm dead sure of it. That was a big column of pony soldiers, probably all the soldiers that guard the Iron Horse camp. Our enemy, Shadler, no doubt is with them, and they are going to the Pine Ridge ranch, as sure as we sit here! They expect to catch us in a trap!"

Burnt Thigh's eyes glowed. "White man Dalton is traitor, huh?" in a ferocious guttural.

"Not on your tintype! Dalton was one of my old gang—dependable. But he's got into trouble over those hides. Shadler and the cavalry must've got back last night from fighting the Cheyennes, and first thing Shadler would do is check on those brands. It would take the whole day to skin so many cattle, and Dalton probably couldn't leave before Shadler arrived. Chief, there's one thing left—to raid the Iron Horse camp while the soldiers are away. The Cheyennes will be glad to help us!"

Burnt Thigh sprang to his feet, shaking his lance toward the distant camp. "Death to the Iron Horse people!" He paused, lowering the lance-head to point at some nearer object. "White men riding!" he exclaimed.

Kilgore rose to his knees, unslinging the telescope. He studied the fast-riding figures laying a course toward the railhead camp from due east.

"One white man, one white girl!" he corrected the Ogallala chief excitedly. "Carfax and his daughter, by hell! Coming down from the north, they must have seen our men with the cattle up yonder, and skirted the hills. They will warn the Iron Horse camp if not overtaken! We must ride fast, chief!"

Kilgore had not mistaken those riders and their ultimate destination. Jethro Carfax and Judith had been wondering why Lanny hadn't re-

turned to Fiddleback ranch and let them know the result of his visit to Pine Ridge. Starting before daybreak to have the coolest hours of morning for the twenty-mile saddle drill, the cowman and his daughter were en route to see Lanny, or learn what had happened to him. On approaching the Lodge Pole Hills, however, the sight of Indians and cattle on the edge of the hills drove them to temporary shelter in the Weeping Water bottom-lands.

"'Tain't none of our stock, for there's been no raid lately!" Jeth said to the girl. "We'll cut around the hills and get the cavalry."

"How many Indians did *you* count, Dad?" Judith was hammering alongside, her brown cheeks flying the colors of a boyish excitement. "Kilgore's outfit, of course!"

Old Jeth replied with his teeth in the wind. "I'm no better at long range tallyin' than you be, sis. Not so many reds on the plain, but maybe a hell-slew back in the hills. I'm hopin' 'tis Kilgore. We'll have to hit the open two mile along here, but the hills'll be behind us then."

They kept glancing rearward as they gave the Lodge Pole Hills a wide ride-around and sent the broncs down the long slope toward the railroad camp. But the rails and the workmen, the puffing construction trains and the canvas-topped town called "hell-on-wheels," were still several miles away when Jeth, his eyes on the back trail, gave a yell and grabbed his rifle.

"Goddlemighty! Lookit that Injun mob hell-spewin' after us. Ride your spurs, sis. I reckon the broncs are good for the run, but it'll be a near thing!"

CHAPTER XII

Tomahawk Finish

LANNY SHADLER was on the south side of camp, below the railroad embankment, when the spine-tingling yell, "Injuns! Injuns!" was raised. On the way from the boarding car, with Sandburr Beeson at heel, to rig mount and ride after the cavalry, the plainsman had dumped saddle, bridle and blanket outside one of the saddle stock corrals. He leaned his Springfield breech-loader against the poles and reached for the catch-rope on the gate post.

As that fear-freighted shout was relayed up and down the rails, the distant drumming of numberless hoofs came to his ears. From the throats of a host of redmen pealed the chilling war cry. Shadler let fall the catch-rope and grabbed up his rifle, and the horses snorted and milled in

the enclosure as he turned away, exclaiming:

"Lordy, Sandburr, is that the Cheyennes we licked up the line? Get your gun and come a-foggin'!"

He struck a fast lope beeline for right of way, while Sandburr, grimly silent, veered off in another direction after his rifle. As the plainsman mounted the low embankment, he was amazed at what he saw; a painted horde of hundreds of Indians, split in two big bands and overrunning the camp. Hard pressed by the nearer band, rode Jeth Carfax and Judith, the cattleman urging the girl ahead of him while he fired, reloaded and fired again "on the rise," at scudding pursuers.

The road gangs had flung aside their tools and were stampeding for rifles stacked beside the rails. Their frantic yells mingled with wild war whoops, creating a bedlam. All hell was loose in the railroad camp and not a trooper left to repulse the red cavalcade!

"They must've been watchin', seen the yellow-legs go!" Shadler reckoned bitterly. He bounded across the rails just as a switch-engine, hauling a load of supplies, rolled up the track, its whistle blasting a steady warning and call to arms.

On the far embankment, Lanny crouched and opened fire on the pursuers of Judith and her father, piling the foremost Indian rider. He was a Cheyenne, his face painted black for revenge, and so were the fierce hawkish faces dodging for ponies' withers as another heavy bullet slapped down the warrior next to the dead leader.

The plainsman dropped two more. He was reckless of arrows winging past his buckskin-clad form and ending their flight in the iron loads of the cars thundering behind him. Then the thin line of pursuers sheered away from a head-on course, and Lanny lifted one arm and shouted lustily. But the Carfaxes had seen him and pointed their foam-spattered broncs for the rails as the last flat car cracked by.

"Pronto to the boardin' train, folks!" the plainsman greeted them, running between their horses and leading the way for the siding. "Whatever brung you at such a time? Goin' to be merry hell—the cavalry ain't here!"

"I'll bet the Injuns knowed it!" barked Jethro, recharging his breech-loader fast as Lanny could have done. "We dropped in to see you, Lanny, when you didn't come to see us. About that Pine Ridge cowman."

"Renegade—pard o' Kilgore's!" Lanny seized the bridle of Judith's horse as a bullet struck near and the animal attempted to bolt down the main track. "I shot it out with Dalton s'mornin'. Just got back last night from fightin' these same reddies up the line."

"Kilgore's with this bunch," Judith announced, leaning down to make herself heard through the terrific din. "We saw him; he tried to ride us down, but some of the Indians cut in ahead."

"Sioux and Cheyennes—tough combination!" Lanny deviated sharply. "Turn off here, the boardin' cars are on yonder sidin'. We'll have to fort up. No tellin' what's happenin' in canvas town, down the track. Arrows and bullets'll go clean through the tent walls."

ROAD builders who had hunkered down in the sand beside the rails, to dig in and stand off the red horde, quickly discovered that this mode of fighting would shortly end in wholesale massacre. The gang bosses flourished six-shooters and ordered retreat to the loop-holed boarding train. All who had not already died by bullet or arrow, lance thrust or crashing tomahawk, were legging it toward the siding, Cheyennes and Sioux at their heels.

Lanny and the Carfaxes joined the rush, the plainsman falling back

as rear guard and using his pistols when Indians swooped into short-gun range. Judith couldn't keep her eyes to the front with Lanny at the rear, slowly backing after them. She expected every instant to see him totter and fall, though the lancing flame of his .44's was causing a break in the yelling group of riders trying to cut in between them and the cars.

Jeth Carfax suddenly swung from his horse and grabbed her arm, hauling her clear of the saddle and landing her on the steps of the nearest boarding-car. Men already inside were shooting through loop-holed walls and Indians riding by jumped their ponies to higher speed, hurling missiles against the wooden carside. Window glass crashed, but the war-trained laborers were keeping away from all apertures as they wielded rifles and short-guns.

Trackmen were still crowding to get into this car, as well as others in the drag. But innate chivalry demanded that they step aside when Jeth prodded forward with his daughter. The cattleman was boosted up behind her, then the clump of broganed feet recommenced, up the steps, along the shell-littered car floor.

The two Fiddleback horses were bolting crazily around the end of the car, down the south embankment, as Lanny, smoking the last shots from his Colts, ran to the steps and swung on. He paused in the vestibule to reload, flattened and opened fire again when a flood of Indians rolled by outside. His face was bloody, his buckskins torn, where missiles had grazed and all but finished him. Lifting to his knees, he darted inside the car, acrid with black powder fumes, filled with the excited babel of the fighting Irish.

Shadler had dropped his Springfield backalong, not being able to tote it and work his .44's at the same time. But there were extra Springfields racked in all the cars, and he snatched one up, pushing and elbowing onward as he examined the load, calling:

"Where you at, Judith? All right, you and your dad?"

She sped along the aisle, stepping over a dead man with a little shudder. "Here, Lanny, here! Both of us unscratched, thanks to you!"

He smiled thinly. "So far, so good! But this camp's doomed 'nless we get the cavalry. They ain't been so long gone I can't catch 'em on the trail. I wanted to say so-long. Stay in the car and you'll be safe."

The laborers uttered a faint cheer, one crying, "Lanny's the lad to get through! We'll hold the bloody Injuns while you're gone, boy!"

Powder-smudged faces were turned hopefully toward him. He wheeled abruptly, but the swift clutch of a firm hand on his arm halted his long stride at the vestibule door. He knew the hand wasn't a man's before he faced about and read iron resolution in Judith's taut features. She had followed him, unheard in the rifle clatter and general din.

"No, Lanny, you're not the one to go!" He bent his ear to catch the words. "You're a crack shot, needed here more than any one man or a dozen of 'em. Now, listen—" she jerked his arm when she saw refusal in his expression—"I can be spared from the firing line. I can ride like a streak—brought up in the saddle. I know the country. Get me up on a horse and I'll fetch back your soldiers! Hurry, Texas man! It's all that will save the camp, by your own words."

He held her at arm's length. "I ought to say no. But you'll be in less danger when you clear the camp than if you stuck here. I'm sure you can do it! Wait, now!"

HE stole to the open car door, projected his head, then crooked his finger at her, and she slipped to his side. The roadbed for some distance eastward was temporarily clear of Indians. The laborers had potted not

a few as they made their last howling ride past the long drag of boarding-cars. Lanny seized her hand, leaped off the steps. She followed nimbly, their feet making quick, crunching sounds along the cinder path.

Around the end of their car they sped and down the embankment. Over in "canvas town" hell was rampant. Plainsman and range girl saw flames shooting upward from torched canvas saloons and gambling hells. There was yelling and banging of guns. They had an angling view of the main street of the little tent and clapboard colony, which was knocked apart every time track's end shifted. Then it set up again in a new locality. Though smoke and dust hid the details, Lanny and Judith could imagine the many horrors being enacted back of that screen.

"Awful!" she exclaimed, running her hardest to keep up with him, dragged onward by his powerful grip. "They're catching the worst of this fight!"

"The reddies'll tank up on booze and be wilder'n ever!" Lanny said. "Here we are!"

She was breathless, almost, as he let go and plunged to scoop his saddle off the ground by the corral. The horses fled around the enclosure, whinnying shrilly. But through the pounding of their hoofs cut the harsh rataplan of other horses at a gallop, menacing screeches, just as Lanny, gripping his saddle by the horn, was about to unlatch the corral gate. Judith cried out:

"Lanny, it's Kilgore!"

With a curse he dropped the saddle, seized his rifle and wheeled, thrusting the girl against the corral fence. His face blazed with fighting fury. This was the end, for Kilgore or himself! The renegade, with Burnt Thigh and three or four Sioux, was slashing down the embankment. They had evidently seen Lanny and Judith escape from the boarding-car, the fanning pony hoofs scattering a thin shower of cinders.

In his haste, Kilgore's horse stumbled and before he could drag the animal up and come on, Burnt Thigh forged ahead, slinging up his rifle. Lanny drew swift bead, shot him in the head below the protruding buffalo horns. The Ogallala chief hit the ground, rolled over in a silent heap.

There was no time for Lanny to reload, but he had his six-shooters, better weapons for the shortening range. Kilgore and two of the Sioux were tearing in abreast. Lanny's lightning swift hands fell and lifted —but only one gleamed with steel. The booming note of a Colt beside him let him know that Judith had snatched the left-hand gun out of his holster. Man and girl, they fired so that their shots roared together.

Kilgore swayed and pitched off his horse—he had taken Lanny's bullet. Judith had scored on an Indian, who rolled from his pony's back, then half rose to hurl his tomahawk. Lanny's lead bit through his vitals and the flung hatchet dropped, almost at the plainsman's feet.

In the same instant he saw Kilgore stagger up and onward, his paint-daubed face a mask of hatred more hideous than an Indian's. He leveled his six-shooter, roaring:

"I'll stand a heap of killin' yet, Shadler! And the girl rides with me!"

The third Ogallala had urged his pony past the lurching renegade. The Indian hurled his lance, and had it not been for Judith's hasty shot, breaking the coppery arm, Lanny must have stopped the lance-head in his breast. It flew wide of the mark, pinning his gun arm to a corral pole as he was throwing down on Kilgore, who claimed the plainsman's undivided attention.

The bullet from the renegade's Colt grazed Lanny's bronzed neck. He wrenched hard to free his arm, but the flesh was caught. Kilgore's bellow of triumph rolled forth, his

Colt hammer rose and fell—with a hollow click! Empty.

Stack flung it aside, seized the handle of the hatchet in his beaded belt. But Lanny, sweating with pain and effort, stooped at the full stretch of his lance-pierced arm, grabbing up the tomahawk thrown by the fallen brave. He could not miss, and desperation spurred him. His swinging left arm released the hatchet in a deadly spin and the big buffalo head was split jaggedly down the middle. Silently Stack Kilgore broke at the knees and Shadler's yell beat upon Judith's ears, roared into the sky. He was a man beside himself!

NEXT moment Judith was helping him work loose the lance, tearing as little flesh as possible. Other Indians, both Sioux and Cheyennes, had been attracted by the fight at the corral and were racing along the rim of the embankment. The plainsman gave a rueful glance at the speared arm, pulled down his fringed sleeve and snatched up rifle with left hand.

"Tie it up later, Judith! Into the corral with you!" He had settled with Stack Kilgore, kept the girl out of the renegade's hands. But the outlook was as black as ever, and he needed not to remind Judith of the fact.

Cut off from the boarding-cars by at least fifty Indians, now hammering to circle the corral, it was equally impossible for plainsman or girl to ride after the cavalry. Their chances of survival in the pole enclosure were desperately slim. But Lanny, turning to it as the only possible shelter, had some idea of keeping the horses between them and Indian lead and arrows, while returning the fire.

That tawny, hatless head among the terrified horses was presently the target of the ululating band. Cheyennes and Sioux were equally avid to take that scalp, for Lanny Shadler had slain the headman of both parties. Arrow-pierced horses stumbled in the stifling dust kicked up by frantic hoofs. Lanny dragged the girl to her knees behind two dying animals, his breech-loader throwing a bullet between the corral poles.

"This is better than dodgin' their hoofs!" he shouted at the girl, reloading with considerable difficulty. "I sure thought the horses would walk over us before the reddies got here."

She smiled bravely, her brown fingers swiftly inserting cartridges in the two .44's. If this was the end of things, it was a comfort to go out fighting with her man.

Lanny grinned at her intrepid spirit, cuddled cheek to gunstock. He threw another yelling Indian to the sod outside, and then—a bugle sounded, not so far off!

He looked blankly at Judith. "Did you hear the same thing or am I goin' mad?"

"We both heard it. It means the soldiers have come back; it means rescue—life instead of death!" Her face was radiant.

He grasped her hand. "And love!" he added, squeezing the imprisoned hand. "I meant to tell you, if we ever got out of this."

"We're not out of it exactly," she leaned toward him, lips provocative, "but even if we die, you've said what I wanted to hear, my dear!"

His lips brushed hers. "All the Indians on the plains couldn't tear us apart now!" he boasted, yanking up the Springfield and squinting along polished barrel.

Not until patches of army blue showed through rents in the swirling smoke and dust, and Indian yells were dimmed by distance, did Lanny crawl over the mound of dead horses, shouting the names of trooper friends. It was Captain Billy Walbank's face which appeared out of the dun haze as he reined close to the corral, reached over the top-rail and clutched Lanny's hand.

"Man, it doesn't look as if we got back a minute too soon! We hadn't ridden very far, traveling at

a road jog, when a flank rider spurred to the head of the column and reported firing at the camp. That locomotive whistle helped carry a warning, too. We knew that prolonged blast meant something was up. So we rounded to and rode our spurs. That you, Miss Carfax? Sa-a-ay, everybody's here!"

"Hello, captain!" Judith laughed joyously, putting her hand in Walbank's. "You certainly saved our scalps! Is it all over?"

"Troop D's mopping up in canvas town," he replied. "I see you've had quite a scrap, you two. Noticed Kilgore out there by the gate, among others."

"Yep, he lost—his life and the beef contract." Lanny Shadler added, grinning happily: "I'll be seein' Dan Heeley and Jeth Carfax directly. I win the contract and—a life partner." He slipped his good arm about Judith.

"Well!" The dusty trooper smiled as if it were his own good luck. "Congratulations, both of you! You'll be leavin' us, then, Lanny?"

But the plainsman shook his head. "Not till the last rail's laid; then down to Texas, after one of the biggest herds that ever come up the trail and back to the Weepin' Water. Jude knows my plans; she's promised to wait. Hey, look! Here comes old Sandburr, tossin' a couple of scalps and yellin' to beat any Sioux or Cheyenne. But he's a man to tie to in a pinch!"

THE WILD BUNCH

"ONE day, three men whose names were never known rode into Meeker, Colorado, left their horses standing at the blacksmith shop, reins down, cowboy style, and walked up the block toward the Hugus and Company general store, in one corner of which was the Hugus and Company bank. They were in puncher dress and wore six-shooters, but riders like them were in and out all the time and nobody paid any attention.

"They went in the front door and one of them turned toward the bank cage just to the left of the entrance, jerking his gun and firing a shot over the head of the cashier—which was where they made their fatal mistake.

" 'Shove out all the cash pronto,' the robber demanded, holding out a sack. His two companions ran toward the back of the room, guns drawn, herding clerks, customers and the manager, A. C. Moulton, ahead of them—hands up, faces against the wall. The robbers were cool and collected, and while the frightened cashier was emptying the money into the sack which the first one held, the others went to the store's gun rack, took down three new Winchesters and cartridge belts. They filled the belts from a showcase, and each buckled one on, reserving the

third for the comrade with the sack of cash.

"While at the showcase the robbers noticed some large silk handkerchiefs, and each selected one and fastened it around his neck. Then all three with a warning for everybody to keep their hands up, went out the side door, the one nearest their horses.

"The one in the lead, carrying the money, had in the pocket of his shirt, puncher style, a sack of tobacco with the round white tag hanging outside, which made an excellent bull's-eye. As he stepped to the sidewalk, three bullets passed through the tag, and he pitched head first into the gutter.

"The second man sprang over the body and gained the middle of the street, stood there a moment. His gun blazed as he shot Bill Clarke, county surveyor, through the arm. Then he crumpled down. The third robber gained the sidewalk and sprinted toward the waiting horses, running perhaps fifty feet, before a half dozen bullets passed through his body, and he likewise fell, stone dead.

"It had happened that just as the robber fired the shot inside the bank, a stage driver, whose name I forget, passed and saw the whole thing through the large front windows. Immediately he began to yell, 'They're robbing the bank! They're robbing the bank!' And that was enough.

"Meeker was a blamed hard town to hold up, for at that time it was a frontier cowtown settled by old-timers, and right in the middle of a big game country—you could shoot deer practically without leaving town. So rifles and cartridge belts, not to mention six-shooters, were always handy, and the robbers were just a little too slow in making a getaway.

"They had left three more saddle horses tied to trees at a spring back a few miles in the hills, all ready for a quick change of mounts. Several days afterward, perhaps a week or more, a cowman came to the spring. Two of the horses were dead, but the third was still on its feet. The rider turned this horse loose, helped it stagger to a swampy patch of ground below the spring where it could nibble grass and sip a few swallows of water, and the animal recovered."

That, in the words of "Billy" Wells, an old-timer, now dead, who knew them well, is how three of the West's famous Wild Bunch died. And it is typical of the fate of a large proportion of those longriders of the owl-hoot trail.

As many of the stories in this magazine are concerned with this group of hard-riding Robin Hoods, we thought it would be of interest to the readers to know something of their history.

In the days of the open range, horses when not in regular use or needed on roundups were turned out to go where they pleased. In fact much of a cowhand's time was spent hunting stray horses. The wildest and fastest horses usually herded together, were very hard to catch, and were known as the Wild Bunch. Gone to the Wild Bunch was a term constantly used to refer to a horse that had disappeared and couldn't be found, or was seen running with a band of these fleet and spooky creatures.

Then when some cowpuncher found life on a ranch too tame or unremunerative, or for some other reason joined up with the gang, the same term was applied to him. They were known as longriders because of the length of their trips with rustled horses which sometimes took them almost from the Canadian to the Mexican borders. They were called owl-hooters, and said to "ride the owl-hoot trail" because it was their custom to announce their presence to each other in the dark or to signal to each other for one reason or another with the cry of the hoot owl.

The Wild Bunch is a pretty loose term, which might apply to any Western outlaws. Their chief activities, however, were roughly from 1885 to

1901. They had things pretty much their way for a while, what with the Butch Cassidy gang in the north in contact with the Blackjack Ketchum gang in the Southwest. Blackjack was a very hard egg, and when he was hanged his head snapped off. The sight of this and hearing of it, must have been somewhat of a deterrent to others who were considering or engaged in a similar career.

Usually, however, the term Wild Bunch is used to refer to the Butch Cassidy outfit, which started operating in Wyoming. But when Butch was pardoned by the governor early in his career when he was in jail for shooting his boss—the case was pretty clearly one of self defense—he promised never to operate in Wyoming again. He kept this promise, and the outfit's activities were transferred to Utah and Colorado.

To read the annals of fiction one would gather that the members of this gang were legion, but there were probably not more than fifty altogether, and not more than ten in the outfit proper at any one time.

At first, anyway, the members of the Wild Bunch had plenty of allies among the small ranchers in the north. There was never any wholesale cattle rustling on the northern ranges as there was in the Southwest. Beef could be sold to mining camps and railroad construction camps, and a lot of it was done, and everyone rode with a long rope as far as mavericks were concerned, but there were never any large herds run off as was the case along the Rio Grande.

In the Southwest, the cowmen were mostly frontiersmen who fought Indians, each other and the Mexicans for their feudal cattle kingdoms. In the north more of the larger ranches were owned by absentee owners in England and the East. Some of them were run by remittance men and Eastern youngsters who looked on cowpunchers as members of the "working class" or servants.

At one time the cowmen encouraged their punchers to build up their own herds, homestead and make a start for themselves. But there came a time when rustling became so annoying that the barons decided to go back on their agreement and run all small ranchers, nesters, homesteaders and squatters off the range indiscriminately. Those who wouldn't leave were bushwhacked, burned out or what not until Champion, a cowboy homesteader, and another man, Gilbertson—according to some authorities, Ray—were killed by a small army of hired gunmen and scions of the Eastern capitalists, caused the small outfits to complete their insurrection against the cattle barons and take over political control of the country. This was the famous Johnson County War which took place in 1892.

This persecution of the small cowmen and nesters by the cattle barons was one thing that drove men to the Wild Bunch. At first they confined their activities largely to stealing horses from the big outfits and running them south. They never molested the little fellows, and in turn were welcomed, fed and hidden out from frantic posses.

All sorts of men belonged to the Wild Bunch. Butch Cassidy was a mild-mannered and well-liked cowboy with almost white hair—what nowadays would be called a platinum blond. Teton Jackson was a college man from the East. One of the most efficient members of the gang was a woman, an ex-school teacher and wife of one of the leaders. I don't know that she ever took part in any of the major holdups, but she was an expert shot with a rifle and helped keep the outlaws in meat.

From horse stealing, the Wild Bunch drifted into bank robbery and train holdups. They cleaned up in a big way. Their hauls ran altogether to a tremendous sum, and the robbers were worth a fortune in rewards to any sheriff or officer who could catch

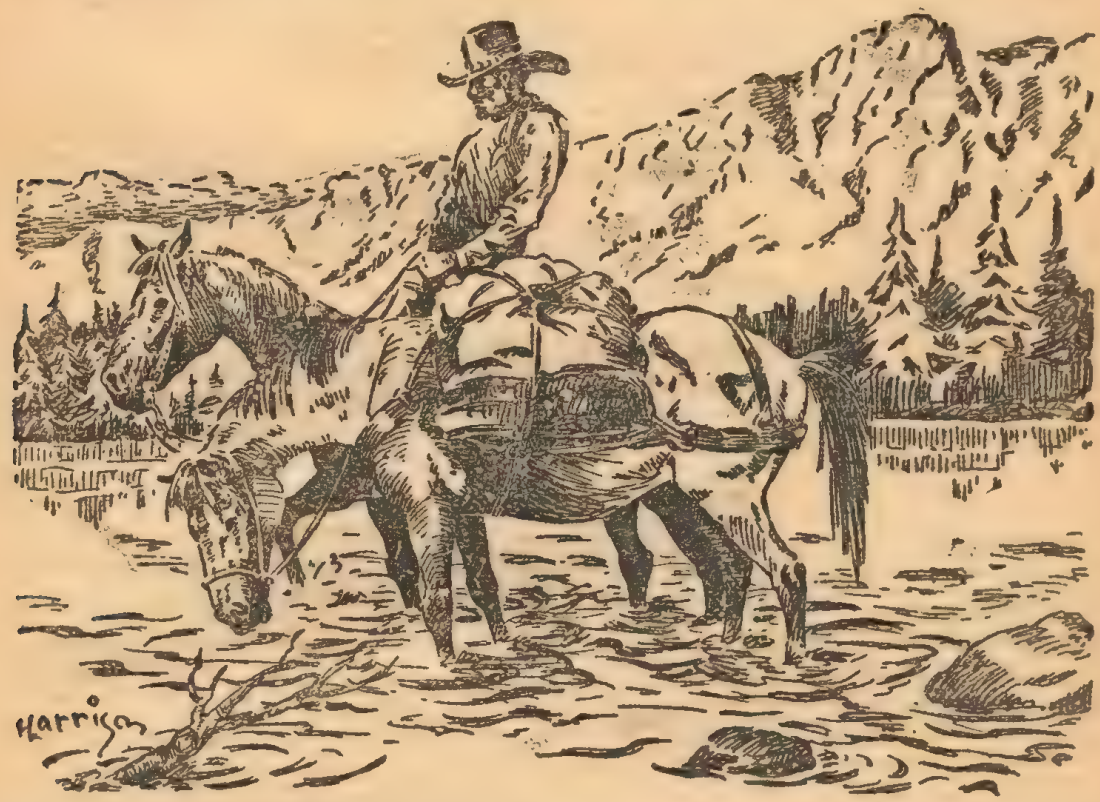
them. Harve Logan, alone, was worth twenty thousand dollars.

For some years they ran Pinkerton detectives, U. S. marshals and other lawmen ragged, but by 1901 most of them had been either killed or jailed. They decided to make one last haul and held up the Great Northern train at Wagstaff, Montana, in June of that year. Their haul was twenty thousand dollars.

After that the outfit disbanded. Harve Logan and his wife and Butch Cassidy, and perhaps others went to the Argentine, where after trying to go straight in ranching the law caught up with them and they turned to outlawry again. What happened to them finally has never been actually proved. There are various stories, one of which is that they were killed escaping from a bank robbery, and that Cassidy killed himself rather than be taken prisoner.

There are many stories about the hangouts — "Holes-in-the-Wall, Robbers' Roosts," and so on—most of them nothing but stories. Some, however, are true. In his book of reminiscences, *Range Rider*, Bud Cowan, whose wife is the fiction writer, B. M. Bower, of *Chip of the Flying U* fame, tells of driving them out of a "Hole-in-the-Wall" in the summer of 1888, when he was repping on the eastern Wyoming and western Nebraska roundup.

This Hole-in-the-Wall is a piece of badlands between the Bellefourche and the Platte rivers. There are three ways into it. One, going in from the Platte side up Blue Grass Creek will accommodate a wagon. To get in this way, you have to pass through a "narrows" about one hundred and fifty feet wide, over which tower cliffs that for a quarter of a mile are from two to to three hundred feet high. Up in these cliffs the outlaws kept their guard.



No wagon had dared work the hole for three years, and there was a lot of cattle in there. Under the leadership of Bob Devine, manager of the CY outfit, the Fiddleback, Goose Egg, Beer Mug, JM, 101, Ogallala, Swan Two Bar, Haley Two Bar and the T7 were in on the raid.

TWO parties of ten each went around the back of the cliffs afoot to take the outlaws in the rear on either side of the pass. When they opened fire, the wagons down in the pass were to go like bats out of hell on through.

In the first fight they killed two outlaws and captured five who were sent to Fort Fetterman, tied hand and foot in a bed wagon. They didn't get babied at Fort Fetterman, for the year before they had nearly wiped out a company of soldiers.

The roundup was in there ten days, rounded up more rustlers, turned loose the men with families and sent the rest to Fort Fetterman. Bud Cowan says that Butch Cassidy and the Curry boys were driven out at this time. Pike Landusky moved out with his family and settled up in the Little Rockies where there is now a town named after him.

"You would be surprised," says the author, "at the number of sympathizers these Hole-in-the-Wall people had there in Wyoming. We drove out about twelve thousand head of cattle to be turned over to their rightful owners."

It must have been just after this that Cassidy moved his headquarters to the famous Robbers' Roost in Utah from which his biggest jobs were handled.

About this time he was at the Bear River Bridge on the trail between Rawlins, Wyoming, and Meeker, Colorado, where he shot the heads off all the chickens at the Ward's roadhouse, while "Hat" Ward cussed his head off. But he gave the old lady a twenty-dollar gold piece for each chicken, and had the cook throw together a chicken dinner for the outfit.

Shortly after he was at the old abandoned 84 ranch on Yellow Creek in western Colorado with a bunch of stolen horses. At the time of the Spanish War, Cassidy and about thirty other owl-hooters got together near Steamboat Springs in Colorado, and sent word to the Government that they would join Torrey's Rough Riders if all charges against them were dropped, but their crimes were too many and too serious.

The Robbers' Roost was in a badland canyon country in Utah, not far from the Uncompahgre Reservation. Mormons running goats, sheep, and a few cattle and horses had settled in there wherever there was a bit of level land and water. The Roost itself is a high-cupped mesa which can be entered only by going along a shelf not six feet wide in places and with "a sheer cliff five hundred feet above you on the left, and a drop into nothing on the right."

The gang had a bunch of Mormons put up cabins and corrals for them, brought in saddle horses and grub, and had as sweet a hideout as ever existed. The Colorado and Wyoming cow outfits were at war, because the Wyoming outfits used to shove their cattle over onto Colorado winter range. So as long as the Wild Bunch left their cattle and local horses alone and confined themselves to bank and train robberies, the cowmen left them alone.

Some day some one is going to write a book about this extraordinary outfit. It will be one of the most fascinating stories ever told. A few people who knew these men are still living, and there is enough data about them in old newspapers, Wells Fargo and Pinkerton files, and in local historical records and collections to fill an encyclopedia. We are eagerly awaiting the time when some enterprising author will tackle this job, and write up this thrilling and neglected chapter of American history.

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